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The Invincible Little Lady
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The Invincible Little Lady: Volume 4 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: Academy Arc—The Prince's Gender Flip Incident Part 1

1. Calm Down and Get Back to the Topic at Hand

A girl's silky, golden hair glittered in the light before my eyes. The breeze played with her long, flowing blonde locks, which framed the large, adorable eyes adorning her face—eyes dyed in the same beautiful azure as a clear blue sky. Her cute pink lips were pursed; I could tell her body was a bit stiff with stress. And speaking of her body, hers was the picture of an adolescent girl's, curving in and out in all the right places to emphasize her femininity.

The girl in question? She was none other than Reifus Lukua Dalford, the first prince of the Aldian kingdom.

You read that right—the girl standing before me was *the first prince*.

H-Huh? H-How did this happen?! Wait, calm down. Just relax and think this through...

Right. Back in my past life, I was in a hospital room where I passed away, and then I reincarnated into this world—

Wait, no, you went back too far! Relax! Seriously, get your act together, Mary!

I took a few deep breaths and focused on the events leading up to this. It all happened a few hours ago...

***

"You mean an exploration of the Academy?" I asked.

While I was relaxing in the lounge, the prince called me over to the adjacent room. When I came in, he suggested as much, and I couldn't help but confirm I'd heard him correctly.

"An exploration... Yes, I suppose that's what it would mean," Reifus said, looking a bit uneasy.

Reifus explained that recently, there had been more and more initiatives by students to manage matters relating to the Academy on their own, such as looking after the old campus building. The way I saw it, these initiatives were thanks to Reifus's efforts to revise the existing system to encourage student participation.

However, therein lay the problem: the past activities of certain students were coming to light, some of which had been being shrugged off until now. This was becoming a problem, and the prince wanted to investigate what things students have left in their wake.

In the most recent incident, it turned out some past students had engaged in personal research that had been either unauthorized or shrugged off only to recklessly leave it lying around after their graduation. Thankfully, the case in question had been an academic study conducted by Lalaios students, so the results of their research hadn't been anything too dangerous—but if it had been an Aleyios student's magical research, the results could have been catastrophic.

Well, it's in the same vein as Instructor Alice's incident, I guess. She used something that'd been left in the Academy's grounds without anyone knowing about it...

"So, we're looking for research that may have been left behind by graduates who didn't pass it on to their juniors and simply left it there?" I asked.

"Indeed." Reifus answered. "So, if you don't mind, Miss Mary, I'd appreciate it if you could lend me your aid."

"...My help?"

"Yes. The students who worked without permission tried to keep their work secret, so they created hidden rooms and other such hiding places. I hope it isn't inappropriate of me to say this, but you've shown a talent for detecting the secret and the unusual. I'd like for you to use your deductive abilities and discerning eye to help me here." The prince said this with an apologetic smile, and I could only smile back vaguely while trying to stop myself from breaking into a cold sweat.

Come to think of it, I do have a way of discovering things people have tried to hide, except that has *nothing to do with a discerning eye or deduction skills and*

everything to do with my broken abilities...

"If it's a request from you, Lord Reifus, I, Mary Regalia, will humbly offer you my aid," I said with a ladylike curtsy.

Normally, I'd have fled from anything that might draw attention to me and come up with excuses, but at this point, I decided to change my approach.

I'll do everything possible to make the prince look better. I'll create situations that make him look like such a miracle worker that no one will spare a look my way! I can't exactly change what I've done until now, after all...

I gazed up at the ceiling, looking back on my past exploits with disappointment.

"What's wrong, Lady Mary? Why are you looking up at the ceiling? Ah, are you hungry?" Sacher, who was sitting in the corner of the room, came up with a stupid reason for my behavior.

"Hmm? Did you say something?" I said, radiating cold terror at him.

"No, nothing..." Sacher trailed off.

For how dumb he was, Sacher had at least learned to pick up on people's vibes. Ignoring him, I turned to the prince again.

"So, are we going to start the investigation now?"

"Yes. I'll be coming along, so I'll be counting on you for help."

And so, we began our exploration of the vast Academy.

"Ah, Lady Lily, you can't go that way!" I heard Tutte call out.

Normally, Tutte would be close behind me, but she'd been running here and there for a while now—it wasn't surprising since she was minding a little child who was running about the campus building curiously.

Needless to say, said child was Lily the divine beast. The headmaster had given the divine beasts permission to move around the Academy's premises...or rather, the headmaster had given up and permitted it since he didn't feel like he had any right to dictate what divine beasts get to do.

In addition, my father, Ferdid, had allowed Snow and Lily to stay in our home for much the same reason. When I'd asked, he'd instantly said "Yes" and proceeded to blissfully bury his face in Snow's fluffy fur—frankly, I had my doubts it'd been his reverence for the divine beasts that'd driven his decision.

"Lily, you're bothering Tutte. Come here," I said, motioning for the small leopard to come.

Lily turned her eyes to me from whatever had drawn her attention and happily hurried over. As I watched her fluffy, roundish body totter over, I could only be shocked by her almost infuriating levels of cuteness.

I spread out my arms to receive the small creature, but Lily heartlessly scampered past me and stopped next to Tutte, who stood behind me. As I stood frozen in place with my arms spread and a now empty smile on my lips, I heard laughter in my head.

Pfft! How humiliating!

The laughter came from Snow, the snow leopard that was behind us. Whenever she was bored, she would hang out with us when we were out of class. Of course, with how large she was, she startled a lot of the students who saw her pacing around the school like she belonged there, but news of her being a divine beast soon spread, and people were starting to get used to her.

Still, I made an effort to keep the details of why a divine beast was hanging around us secret—mostly for my sake. When pressed on it, I said it was related to the prince, dropping the term "royalty" to forcibly silence anyone nosy enough to ask. And whenever I did, the prince just laughed and let me use him as an excuse. I was lucky he was such a magnanimous person.

Anyway, I hung my head at being ignored and fell to my knees.

"L-Lady Mary, I think Lady Lily just thought you'd told her to come back to me and misunderstood."

"Well, that's because Tutte's the one always looking after Lily. She just naturally knows who she should go to!" Snow said teasingly.

"I want to play with Lily too! I'm just busy! I have things to do, unlike you, who spends all day napping in the entrance hall!" I objected.

“You say that, but I recall a certain someone burying her face in my fur and falling asleep too!”

“W-Well, I, erm—” I clammed up, unable to come up with a response.

Snow was right. Her fluffy fur was so soft and pleasant I’d ended up looking for her and burying my face in it. As I stammered for lack of a reply, I felt something soft rub against me and looked down. Lily had noticed my dejected mood, approached me, and rubbed her soft fur against me. Overcome by her cuteness, I picked the small leopard up and lovingly rubbed my cheeks against her.

“Oh, Lily, you little scamp!” I hugged her, assuming she meant this to say her rejection from earlier was a joke. But my hug was a little too hard...

“Ah, Mary, be careful! Lily’s making weird noises! You’re hugging her too hard, you brute!” Snow chided me.

“Don’t call me a brute! I’m just expressing my lov—” I snapped at Snow, but then came to. “Aaaah, Lily went limp!”

I started desperately shaking Lily, and Tutte, who was watching the whole time and managed to understand what was happening, hurriedly took Lily out of my hands. There was something akin to sympathy in Tutte’s eyes, but I must have imagined that... Yeah, let’s just leave it at that...

Maybe that’s why Lily chooses to stay away from me... I should restrain myself.

“We’ll go on ahead, Lady Mary...” Magiluka, who had watched me and Snow argue, said this with a very fed-up tone and walked away.

I couldn’t blame her. Only I could hear Snow, so to them, it all looked like I was loudly having an argument with myself. As such, Magiluka and the others decided to leave me behind and go on ahead.

“Ah, wait, wait, I’ll come with you...!”

I hurried after the rest of them, and Snow followed me, looking unaffected. After a bit of a detour, I returned to the topic at hand—the investigation of the Academy.

2. The Search Is On

I walked through the school, followed by Tutte, Lily, Snow, Magiluka, Safina, Sacher, and Reifus. Since we didn't have any objective in particular, it was a pretty vague search. As I looked around, scanning for anything that might seem suspicious, Reifus spoke up.

"Was this idea a bit too directionless? Maybe we should narrow down the range of where we're looking."

He was right. The whole Academy was too vast, and it wouldn't be efficient if we didn't narrow the scope of our search.

"Maybe we should split up, Lord Reifus," I suggested.

"But Lady Mary, we're not as good as you are at spotting hiding places," Magiluka instantly objected. "We'd just pass by a possible hiding spot without even noticing it."

Oh, right, there's no guarantee the others would actually find anything. Hmm... This is a pickle.

I groaned, conflicted, then crossed my arms and closed my eyes. I wasn't very good at thinking stuff like this out though. I wished I could leave this in Magiluka's hands, but if she'd had a better idea, she would have suggested it by now.

"Ah, what is Lady Lily doing?" I heard Tutte say.

I looked at Lily, who was sniffing the ground, raising her head, taking a few steps, then repeating. She looked like a dog using its sense of smell to sniff something out.

But I mean, that's something dogs do. Leopard cubs can't pull a stunt like that off.

"Looks like Lily's looking too," I whispered. "But can she really sniff something like that out? I mean, she wouldn't know the scent of what she's looking for."

"Ah, no, that's not necessarily true," Snow replied.

"What do you mean?" I unfolded my arms and turned to Snow.

Everyone else did the same and turned to look at me and Snow. I could see they all had expectant looks in their eyes, but maybe I was imagining that... Yeah, I probably was, let's leave it at that...

"Well, we're pretty sensitive to mana, so if Lily's sniffing something, she probably detected mana. Oh, watching my baby sister work so hard is a touching sight..." Snow gestured like she was wiping a tear.

"Oh, yes, very," I said with a broad grin. "A shame her big sister is a good-for-nothing who only sucks up food."

Having had her sloth pointed out, Snow stopped acting like she was wiping away and glared at me. I let my grin die down and glared back at her. We spent a few seconds glaring at each other silently.

Wait, isn't it like a thing in the animal kingdom where whoever looks away first is considered the loser? Or is that just with dogs? That idle thought crossed my mind suddenly.

Snow ended up caving to my taunt. *"All right, if it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get! I'll show you how serious I can be!"* she said excitedly.

"Yaaay, how reliable," I said in a monotone voice.

Honestly, I wasn't expecting much from this lazy divine beast, but I was just pleased to get her involved in the search.

Snow lowered her snout to the floor and started searching. She sniffed around not just the floors, but even the walls, and given her large size, she caused a great deal of inconvenience for the people passing by. She even approached some students and started sniffing them, which resulted in them falling backwards in surprise.

"Sniff sniff, sniff sniff... I sense some suspicious mana from over there."

Well, uh, let's ignore all the trouble she's causing... I thought to myself dryly. "What kind of suspicious mana?" I asked. "What are you looking for so hard that you're willing to cause trouble for everyone around here?"

If Snow had been just a little smaller, I'd have chopped her over the head to stop her, but she was a bit too large for that.

“What...?” She stopped sniffing for a second and realized she didn’t know what she was looking for*. “Hmm? What is this, really...? Hey, what are we looking for again?”*

“I shouldn’t have counted on you...”

It was stupid of me to even try to rely on her. I have to apologize to all the people she troubled here. It’s all her fault, not mine for getting her to do this. My shoulders sank as I apologized to the prince and everyone else in my heart, then I shrugged off all responsibility for the matter.

“Fine, we’re not asking for your help anymore, you can go b—” I started saying tiredly.

“Shush!” Snow silenced me. *“This is... I sense some powerful mana.”*

She narrowed her eyes and looked in another direction, but even with how serious she was acting, I didn’t believe her. *She’s probably trying to pass herself off as cool or something. She doesn’t even know what we’re looking for, or rather, she probably forgot that we’re even looking for something...*

“Yes, yes, you can drop the act now—” I sighed and closed my eyes as I approached Snow to get her to stop, but when I opened my eyes, she wasn’t there anymore. “Ah, wait!”

I looked around in a panic until I spotted the dumb, large feline speeding through campus, once again caring little for all the people she scared. I watched her move further away in silence for a moment, hearing screams and yelps of surprise in the distance...

“Um... Miss Mary? Would you care to explain what just happened?” The prince asked, naturally confused and unaware of my exchange with her.

That’s what I want to know! But I get the impression saying that is a bad idea. I was stumped for an answer, distressed as I was with the words “It’s an owner’s responsibility to clean up after their pet” coursing through my mind.

“Well, Your Highness. Shouldn’t we go after Lady Snow for the time being?” Magiluka suggested reasonably.

“Y-Yes, you’re right, let’s go after it. I can explain later,” I nodded, excitedly

accepting her idea.

We ran in the direction Snow took off in, and we found there was already a crowd forming there. Sacher and Magiluka had the students make way for the prince. The students complied, and thanks to that, I could see ahead.

The prince walked through the cleared path, me and Safina in tow. Lily sat in Tutte's arms, looking around at the students curiously. And as we passed through the crowd...

"Ha ha ha! It's over here! It smells of treasure here!"

The stupid leopard who'd run around the school, sniffing everyone and everything in her way, was now squatting in an open patch of ground, burrowing through the soil with her paws in an attempt to dig something out.

"...She's digging," Reifus said in a baffled manner as he looked at the divine beast gleefully clawing at the ground.

"That she is." I said.

A moment's silence hung over us before I cracked.

"My apologies, Sir Reifus. I'll go stop this nincompoop before she gets permabanned from the Academy," I said, so panicked that I spoke with a mixture of politeness toward him and rudeness toward the big cat.

"Perma...banned? Nincompoop?" The prince looked baffled by my words. "Ah, huh... Yes, I'll be counting on you."

"Yes, thank you!" I leaped into action as soon as the prince gave me permission.

Normally, I'd have rushed her with a cry of "What the heck do you think you're doing?!" and drop kicked her over the head, but I was aware I shouldn't do that to a divine beast. Plus, people were watching...

I took a deep breath, then another—and a third because I needed another one to fully calm myself—as I swiftly paced over to the stupid leopard gleefully digging through the soil.

"Oh, Snoooooow. What do you think you're doooooing?" I asked, my voice trembling as I withstood the urge to shout at her.

With my grin still intact but a vein bulging in my forehead, I caught sight of Snow's tail as it waggled to and fro, then I grabbed it hard and squeezed.

"Ungyaaaaaaaaaaa!" Snow instantly stopped digging and jumped. *"N-Not the tail!"*

"Don't make it sound weird!" I snapped at her, taken aback by her yelp and letting go of her tail.

"Hey, no violence! I was just getting to the good part!" Snow protested, her tail wagging back and forth tensely.

"The good part...? Listen, if you keep going out of control like this, you'll seriously get permabanned."

"Permabanned?" Snow cocked her head, confused by the unfamiliar word.

"It means you won't be allowed to come to the Academy anymore."

"What? But why? I really did find something suspicious." Snow said, patting on the ground with her paw.

"Something suspicious?"

"That's right! There's something mighty suspicious here." Snow began burrowing into the ground again.

As I watched her, I checked for a certain phenomenon.

I guess unlike all the other times, there's nothing magically hidden here.

Since I was immune to all kinds of illusion and perception-obstructing magic, their presence was basically a huge red flag that told me where something was being hidden. I didn't notice any such thing this time though.

"There's nothing there, just give up and—" I said tiredly.

"Ah, there's a rock here... Aiyah!" Snow dived into the hole she dug, and the next moment, I heard something getting crushed. *"Oooh! It leads somewhere really spacious!"*

"You're joking!" I hurried over to the hole, only to spot her peeping her head out of it proudly.

"Aha! Do you see what a divine beast can do when she puts her mind to it?!"

She said, huffing out in a bragging manner.

“Get away from me. You’re too close.” I took a step back, fed up with the large leopard filling my field of vision.

I turned around to look at everyone, each of them standing a short distance behind us.

“Sir Reifus, Snow found something down there.”

“Impressive. That’s the kind of work I’d expect from a divine beast. I’m surprised she knew to look there...” Reifus said.

Rejoicing at the prince’s praise, Snow proudly raised her upper body and let out another proud huffing of her nose.

“Heh, heh, heh... What do you say, Mary? Did I do good? Come on, tell me—how amazing am I?” Snow pushed her head toward me again, wishing to be praised.

“Uh, yeah, you did good...” I pushed her head away, annoyed.

I did have to admit she did good work here. With little to no information, she’d sensed a faint amount of mana and discovered this place. But still, while her results were impressive, the way she’d gone about getting them was less than admirable.

I guess I should really go and apologize to everyone later... I did put her up to this... I thought to myself with a dry smile as I looked over all the dirt Snow dug up, all the places she’d stormed through, and all the people she’d knocked to the ground.

Once Snow was done looking, the rest of the group got started on our search. When I came back from my round of apologies, I found they’d made good progress. Sacher and Safina cleared people from the area around the hole and stood guard.

If we had yellow police tape, it would really look like some kind of crime scene. And then I could go over the tape like some kind of detective... Aww, now I want to try it!

“Oh, Lady Mary, welcome back,” Safina hurried over upon spotting me.

“No, Safina, at times like these you’re supposed to salute and say ‘Hello, ma’am!’”

“Huh?” Safina blinked.

“Nothing, never mind...” I mumbled, sadly remembering this didn’t make sense to anyone else but me.

As I regretted my words, Reifus approached.

“Magiluka went to report this place to the headmaster and gather information,” he explained.

“All right. Let’s go in and investigate then, inspector,” I said, unable to fully shake off the image from my head.

“Huh?” Reifus looked at me blankly.

“Uh, never mind,” I said, feeling a cold sweat creep over me as I realized I’d once again slipped up. “Let’s go, Sir Reifus.” I walked toward the hole, forcibly trying to change the topic.

As I did, Snow, the digger of that hole, began piling up the soil she’d dug up, and Lily joined her. I had Tutte stand nearby and watch them. Snow grumbled the whole time. Incidentally, she was wearing the sign I placed over her neck, which read “I’m the one who stampeded through the school, scared everyone, and dug up all this soil.”

As I approached the hole, the sudden realization that only Reifus and I were going to go in there dawned on me.

Just the two of us in a dark, underground space... Only to then unfortunately get trapped, support and encourage each other until we escape, and then... My delusions somehow veered off from a police procedural to a horror movie.

“Wait, Miss Mary!” I heard Reifus say.

“Yes, Sir Rei— Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Apparently, he was calling for me to stop, because I ended up walking right into the hole Snow had dug and fell right in. As ashamed as I was to say it, I basically hadn’t been looking at where I was going in a spectacular display of ditziness, and my skirt floated up spectacularly as I fell... That last part I wanted

to forget.

Thankfully, due to me being invincible, I wasn't hurt by the fall, and I simply landed in the same pose I fell in. I was so embarrassed that I went red in the face at my comically powerful resilience and leaned my head against the wall of the pit.

"M-Miss Mary! Are you all right?!" I heard the prince call out from above me in a panic.

"I'm fine... Um, I'd appreciate it if you didn't look at me right now. And, um, if you could wipe what just happened from your memory..." I said, hiding my flushed face with my hands, unable to look up at the prince.

"...Um, very well..." The prince's reply came after a brief, awkward silence.

That only made me all the more shy. I could only assume he'd gone silent because my words reminded him of what he'd just seen.

Aah, I can't believe myself... If I could bury myself in a hole I would. Wait, I'm already in a hole. Oh, silly me. Teehee!★

I tried to joke to myself in my thoughts, but the stupidity of it all made me want to beat my head against the earthen wall of the pit.

3. On Site Inspection

As I beat my head against the wall, a rope ladder was thrown down the pit. Seeing this made me finally come to as I watched the prince nimbly climb down the ladder.

Come to think of it, Reifus is the type to do everything perfectly. I guess he's not specialized for any one thing, but more like a jack of all trades? I thought to myself as I watched him climb down the unsteady ladder.

"Phew... Oh, Miss Mary, you really are fine," Reifus said with concern as he descended to the bottom of the pit, once again worrying about me. He truly was a gentleman in this regard. His every motion was elegant, and he gave me the impression he would grow up into a very popular, all-capable royal.

I suppose that's just royalty for you... Well, no, considering his flirt of a father, maybe that's not quite right.

"What's wrong, Miss Mary?" The prince peered into my face as I pondered this, looking a bit concerned.

"N-Nothing," I said, unwilling to admit I was looking at him. "Right, let's start the inspection, then."

I started walking around the open space within the pit, trying to change the topic. There was light filtering in from above, but it was still dark. Still, even with the poor lighting, the room definitely looked manmade.

"Light." I cast a spell to light up the room.

As expected, the room looked to have been buried down here for years, and there was no sign of anyone having come here recently. But, of course, this was just a cursory look, so I didn't know this for sure.

I took another look around the room. The bookshelves and chairs whoever had set this room up once used were now old and crumbling, and the shelves didn't seem to have any books on them. The place had been thoroughly cleaned out.

"It doesn't look like anyone has used this place any time recently," I suggested.

"Yes. It looks like the place was just left here, abandoned... I suppose? But I think it's strange that it was buried."

Reifus brought up the obvious question. If this was just an unused basement room, why bury it?

It almost feels like someone wanted to seal this place... That scary thought crossed my mind, and I instantly shook my head so as to reject it.

"Miss Mary?" Reifus asked, confused by my actions.

"Oh, nothing, don't mind that... Let's check inside the desks."

You're overthinking this! It's just that so many things have been going in a way that makes me really conspicuous recently, so I'm getting pessimistic. But I have to stay positive. There's nothing here! And that's for the best.

In an attempt to rouse myself and shake off the negative thoughts, I approached a nearby desk and pulled one of its drawers open. As it opened with a sliding sound, I discovered an ominous looking box inside it.

Noooo! There's actually something here! I screamed internally.

Panicked, I tried to shut the drawer, but since it was old, it got stuck and wouldn't close. My attempts to push it in only made the drawer crack with a loud noise. I'd ended up making things worse.

"There's a box there." Reifus turned around, noticing my discomposure, and peered into the drawer.

"So it seems..." I gave up on trying to act like I'd seen nothing and let go of the drawer.

I picked up the box and placed it on the desk. It was surprisingly large, and I had to use both hands to pick it up. The reason I'd tried to pretend like I hadn't seen it was because the box was too pretty. While everything else in the room looked faded and degraded, this box alone looked pretty and brand new. I wasn't optimistic enough to assume it was just an ordinary box—my experience from having come this far warned me that this thing was bad news.

"Does this...have some kind of spell applied to it?" the prince wondered aloud. He was looking at the box cautiously after seeing my reaction.

"I don't think it's any immediate danger, but do be careful, Sir Reifus," I said.

If there had been any dangerous magic affixed to it, it'd have gone off the moment I'd picked it up. The fact nothing had happened implied it wasn't cursed.

"Yes. Well, let's take this up to the surface while taking care not to open it—" The prince suddenly trailed off and looked around, like he'd just heard someone call out to him. I didn't hear anything, though.

"Is something the matter?" I asked.

"No, I just thought I heard a voice... Aha ha, I guess I must have imagined it." The prince smiled wryly, saying something quite scary. I looked around, wondering if there was a ghost about, but all I saw was a dark, closed room. No

ghosts in sight.

“I don’t think there’s anyone else but us here,” I said.

“Yes, I was probably just imagining things.”

I breathed out, trying to calm myself from the suspense, and leaned against the desk.

That was a mistake.

The desk was already weathered as it was, and me having forcibly tried to push the drawer back in had apparently caused it considerable damage. My weight leaning against it created a crack that made the desk fall apart.

Okay, just to clarify, I am not heavy! This didn’t happen because of my weight! It’s important, so I said it twice!

As I defended myself in my mind, the desk snapped, and I, who’d been trying to lean on it, dropped to the floor with a yelp.

“M-Miss Mary!” Reifus reacted to my voice and reflexively reached out to grab me, bracing his feet.

However, then we heard a large sound—the box I’d placed on the desk fell to the floor. I, however, was in no state to look at it—because my face, which was very red at that moment, was buried in the prince’s chest...

Whoaaa?! What is this? What’s going on?! Oooh, j-just calm down, Mary! My speeding pulse, calm thyseeeeelf! I tried to simmer down, my head in a state of total panic. My sole salvation here was that I knew if I started thrashing under his hold, I could end up hurting the prince, so I was able to remain composed enough to freeze up.

“Are you all right, Miss Mary?”

“Y-Yeeees... Th-Thank you for askiiing...” I said, still trying to slow down my thumping pulse.

And maybe that was why all I did was simply watch idly at what the prince did next. He looked at the fallen box and walked over to it, like something had lured him closer. The box’s lid was slightly open from the impact of the fall, and there was something sparkling from inside it.

“I hear a voice...” Reifus whispered, and without a moment’s hesitation, he picked up the box and opened its lid.

I was listening carefully, but I didn’t hear any voices. And while I was focused on listening, the prince held the contents of the box in his palms and got to his feet. It was a pretty circlet. But when I saw the way his eyes turned blank when he held it, I immediately felt every hair on my body stand on end.

“Sir Reifus, no! Throw it awa—”

But before I could finish my sentence, the prince put the circlet on his forehead. The moment he did, it lit up in a flash of light that filled the room for a moment. I had to narrow my eyes and cover my face with my hands.

The flash lingered for a few seconds, and when it died down, I was faced with something that defied my imagination. What little sunlight filtered into the room was now shining on long, silky, golden hair, which glittered under the sun’s rays. That hair framed adorable blue eyes, overflowing with charm, and the thick, well-shaped lips below them. To top it all off, that pretty face belonged to a body with emphatically feminine proportions—conspicuous breasts, a narrow waist, and shapely buttocks.

And, of course, that beautiful blonde girl’s name was Reifus Lukua Dalford, the first prince of the Aldian kingdom.

Huh? What’s going on here? Tell me, God!

As that thought crossed my mind, the prince blinked, regaining his bearings, and looked down at his body, instantly freezing up where he stood. And so, the (former) prince and I simply stood in silence in this room, unsure what to make of this situation, at which point I traced back the events leading up to this. Which, well, took a while...

This...isn’t my fault, is it?



4. A Princess

“Miss Mary... What happened to me?” he asked while running his fingers through his long, flowing hair. Because he wasn’t able to see himself, the prince was the first to regain his cool.

“Um.... Well, this is just my...subjective observation, but... Hm...” I stammered incoherently, unable to make sense of the situation.

The prince simply looked at me patiently, seemingly mentally ready for the news. I racked my brain for the right way to put it, but I could only come up with one stupid way of wording it.

“You’re...a princess now...”

I mean, what am I supposed to say?! That’s just what happened here!

With his blonde, flowing hair and that pretty, shining circlet, Reifus looked like a princess! Even though he was wearing men’s clothes...

“A princess...? You mean...I’ve become a lady?” Reifus asked, still in disbelief, and he started patting down at his body to confirm what I’d said.

The prince reached for his chest, where his breasts nearly spilled out of his shirt. He squeaked in surprise and covered them up, a blush on his cheeks.

Huh? I can’t really tell from afar... Are they big?

I homed in on that unimportant question. Noticing my suspicious gaze, Reifus let go of his chest and reached for the circlet on his forehead.

“Miss Mary...” he said, feeling around the circlet with a very vulnerable expression.

“...Yes, Your Highness?” I asked, easily guessing at the next thing he’d say.

“It won’t come off...”

“I see...”

I doubted the prince(ss) would joke at a time like this, and I could see he was trying to take it off with quite a bit of force, but to no avail. The circlet remained

fixed in place, like it was part of his body.

We settled into another confused silence, unsure about what to do. For a second, I considered using my strength to crush the circlet, but because it was what'd caused the change Reifus had gone through, I couldn't risk something happening to him when it broke. Despite everything, he was still the prince, and I couldn't do anything reckless.

"Your Highness! Lady Mary!"

While we remained silent, trying to wrap our mind around this situation, I heard Magiluka call out to us from the entrance to the shaft. We both looked in the direction of her echoing voice, spotting Magiluka descend the rope ladder unsteadily...and then fall on her backside.

"Magiluka, are you all right?" I hurried to her side.

She was close to the ground when she fell, so I doubted she was hurt, but I had to make sure.

"O-Ow... I-I'm fine." Magiluka held up a hand to stop me. "More importantly, Lady Mary, what did you find inside the room?"

She got to her feet, batting the dust from her skirt. She did seem fine, but the question she asked was more of an issue...

"Umm, well..." I stammered, unsure how to explain when I still felt at a loss about the situation myself. "Well, it looks abandoned, so there was nothing wrong with the room...or, well, with the room itself..."

I trailed off there. Magiluka looked at me, puzzled, waiting for me to finish my sentence. The prince stepped forward, lit up by the light shining down from the shaft, and Magiluka stared at him with wide eyes.

"Y-Your Highness...? I-Is that you?" She asked, her hands trembling.

I swallowed nervously, standing behind the prince.

"Ah... Yes, I am... What do I look like right now?" The prince said, scratching his cheek awkwardly.

Despite his tone and mannerisms being much the same, Magiluka instantly recognized his voice and physique had completely changed. Anyone who saw

the prince like this would believe he's an attention-grabbingly beautiful girl.

"Y-Y-Y-Your Highness, y-y-you're a...p-princess...?"

Saying this was apparently all Magiluka could manage. She wobbled where she stood and crumbled backwards.

"M-Magiluka, hang on! I'm counting on you here!" I hurried to catch her and shook her in an attempt to wake her up.

She was the brains of our group—it was her job to think fast on her feet and come up with a plan! Since I had no idea how to fix this, I was pinning all my hopes on her, so I ruthlessly forbade her from escaping into dreamland.

"I'm fine... I'm fine, so stop shaking me! I can't think like this!" Magiluka scolded me, no longer in a daze. Relieved, I let her go. "Can you tell me what happened?" she asked.

The prince and I started to tell her everything. "Umm, well, Miss Mary fell into the hole..." the prince began.

"She fell?" Magiluka blinked.

"Sir Reifus, I told you to forget that," I said.

Reifus's expression turned apologetic, and Magiluka looked at me, puzzled. Her eyes seemed to urge me to carry on.

"Well... When we entered the room, we didn't find anything," I continued.

"Yes, but then, Miss Mary opened a drawer, and we found a strange box."

When Reifus explained this, Magiula's gaze turned colder as she looked at me. I looked away from her, turning my eyes to the prince while sweating bullets internally. Somehow, once we settled down and explained the story, it all started to look like my fault.

"And then, Miss Mary leaned against the desk, but since it was so old, it fell apart. I tried to catch her, but that made the box fall over and open. Then I heard a voice..."

"A voice?" Magiluka turned to look at me suspiciously. I instantly shook my head to indicate I didn't know anything about it.

“After that, my memory’s a bit hazy. The next thing I knew, the tiara was on my head, and I looked like this.”

The prince brushed up her bangs and showed Magiluka the circlet with a sheepish smile. The circlet gleamed mysteriously in the light filtering down from above, emphasizing its presence.

“Also, Reifus can’t take the circlet off,” I said, delivering the final blow.

“He can’t take it off...?” Magiluka murmured, once again swooning.

“Magilukaaaa! Noooo! We’re counting on you heeeere!” I grabbed her by the shoulders and once again pulled her back to the waking world.

“A-Anyway...” Magilka pulled herself together. “Your Highness, please get away from this room. Lady Mary, you and I should stay here and check if we can’t find anything else in here.”

Leaving Reifus near the entrance to the shaft, Magiluka led me back into the room.

“So, what are we looking for, Magiluka?”

“I will check the box. Hopefully, I will be able to glean some useful information.”

“Oh, I see. Oh, come to think of it, did you ask the headmaster about this place?” I asked as we approached the box, recalling why Magiluka had been gone to begin with. She’d been on her way to tell the headmaster about this room and ask if he knew anything about it.

“Well... As always, he said he doesn’t know anything about this place. I swear... This academy was much too indifferent about what its students did...” Magiluka vocally criticized the Academy, which was rather unusual for her—she must have found the management to have been just that bad, but that wasn’t anything new...

We soon reached the box, and Magiluka started nervously poking it with a finger.

“So this is it... It looks like an ordinary box, and I can’t hear any voices,” Magiluka said, confirming nothing happened when she touched it.

“The voice probably came from the circlet, and the box was only a container for it,” I said as she picked it up and carefully examined its bottom and back sides.

“And you didn’t hear anything, Lady Mary?” she asked.

“No, nothing.” I shook my head as I stuck to only watching her and doing nothing. If there was going to be a repeat incident, I wasn’t going to be part of it. Still, Magiluka’s presence helped me think more calmly, and as I watched her examine the box from each side, I realized something.

“Say, Magiluka, is it just me, or is the box’s bottom oddly thick?” I asked.Yes, I got the impression the bottom of the box was needlessly deep.

Magiluka agreed with my observation, and she brought the box to her ear and rattled it. Indeed, we heard something small move inside it. “It must have a false bottom,” she concluded.

“W-Well, can you open it?” I asked nervously, despite being wary of us discovering something weird again.

“There could be a clue inside,” Magiluka nodded, removing the hidden compartment’s lid with surprising ease. “This is a book... No, it’s a memo pad.” Magiluka took out what looked like an old, small notebook.

A memo pad...? In a horror movie, the most important part would be ripped out, and the more you read and the more time passed by, the more the text would become unhinged... Don’t tell me that circlet does that *to people!* I shuddered, recalling a certain move and video game cliché.

Oblivious to my fears, Magiluka inspected the memo pad, confirming there was nothing unusual about it, and she started slowly flipping through it. “Hmm, let’s see what it says... ‘First, let me say this. I am a perfect, talented, and incredibly handsome man.’”

We both fell silent. My expression became quite inexplicable as I pursed my lips in displeasure. Magiluka looked much the same and stopped reading there.

Yeah, no, whoever wrote this was crazy to begin with. Getting bad vibes already.

Still, our investigation was just getting started. We couldn't lose heart and quit here...

5. The Notebook's Contents

An odd atmosphere descended over the sealed room. Magiluka cleared her throat intentionally and started reading again.

"Hmm, next it says...'Because I'm so handsome, the girls are all over me! I'm so incredibly, terribly popular I'm not sure what to do with myself.'"

Magiluka nearly snapped the notebook shut. I understood the urge, but I needed her to withstand it and keep reading. "Magiluka, I know reading this is very irritating, but bear with it," I told her.

"If that's how you feel, Lady Mary, why don't you try reading it?" Magiluka said grumpily and handed me the notebook.

I was taken aback by her giving up so easily. I took the notebook and, after calming myself, carefully opened it. In my case, me losing my temper would result in my tearing the book apart, after all.

"'However, no woman is a match for me. I'm just too much of a perfect, talented, and incredibly handsome man. The gods failed to create a woman who could match my sublime perfection, an unforgivable sin, indeed'..."

I stopped, looked up at the ceiling, and took a deep breath.

Keep it cool, keep it cool. You have to keep it cool, Mary... I chanted to myself, trying to restrain the urge to slam the notebook against the ground,

"'So, one day, the idea occurred to me. Divine revelation, indeed! Yes. The only woman possibly perfect enough to match me was none other than myself'... Huh?!"

This time I had to exclaim in disbelief. How couldn't I? The leap in logic here left me dumbstruck. Thankfully, Magiluka was just as shocked, and she didn't notice the silly, improper noise I'd made. I read on, still in shock, despite having a good idea of what was going to be written next.

"'So, I figured I would create the answer to my woes—a magic item that turns

men into women!’”

I was miraculously able to withstand the impulse to tear this thing in half and say “You idioooot!” I did it by letting go of the notebook and letting it fall to the ground. I personally wanted to praise myself for having the prudence to do this in the heat of the moment.

We glanced at Reifus, who stood a good distance away. He’d heard us read the notebook out loud, and he could only crack a strained, uncomfortable smile. Since the contents of the text were gradually turning more and more stupid—too much so for me—Magiluka picked up the notebook and took over reading it with a skewed, unpleasant expression.

“‘So, I decided to focus on creating the item. I assumed it wouldn’t take too long. I am a genius, after all!’”

So, now you’re a genius on top of being perfect and handsome, you narcissist? As I thought this to myself in disgust, Magiluka continued leafing through the notebook and reading aloud.

“‘This is strange... I can’t complete it, despite my talents and intellect? How can this be? Are the gods getting in my way out of envy?’”

Much to my surprise, the writings soon became even more sketchy. I cocked my head as I listened.

“‘This place simply won’t do! I need somewhere to focus on my research! A perfect man like myself should have no problem creating a secret room or two, so I will! It’s not my fault I can’t complete the magic item—I just wasn’t working in an environment conducive to this research!’”

Sounds like excuses to me, Mr. Perfect Man. But I guess this is how this chamber came to be.

As I listened to the text—which was becoming more ominous with every entry—I looked around the room, realizing the space’s origins. It was empty now, but whoever had made it had likely brought many tools here, keeping it all secret from the Academy.

“‘Something is wrong. I’ve made the perfect work environment. I’ve borrowed all the newest work tools. But I still can’t make it! I’m struggling to

make this work! This can't be!'"

Looks like you've finally lost it, stupid Mr. Perfect Man.

Apparently his research had hit a wall. Little by little, I was becoming curious to find out how this ended. Magiluka also flipped through the pages more lightly, looking like she was engrossed too.

"'I can't do this... Huh? Wait, am I...? Am I actually not as perfect as I thought? Am I not the all-capable genius I thought myself to be? Was I just a normal person all along?'"

I guess he got so depressed from not making any progress that he started getting all negative. He's getting modest... Don't give up, Mr. Perfect Man. You can do it!

His sudden change in attitude made me start cheering for him. But suddenly, Magiluka's hands stopped, and she froze up.

"What's wrong, Magiluka?" I asked.

She wordlessly turned the notebook around and held it up for me to read. Its contents read...

"I can't I can't"

Yikes!

I shuddered, feeling goosebumps spread over me. The whole page was covered in that phrase from corner to corner.

"Magiluka... What does it say next...?"

"Are...Are you sure we won't get cursed for reading it the whole way through?" Magiluka cowered from the prospect of reading any more of this crazy notebook.

I couldn't deny the possibility, but a realization dawned on me.

"W-Well, I don't know anything about a curse, but he did end up finishing the

magic item. It turned Sir Reifus into a girl, so he probably ended up completing it."

Magiluka glanced at the prince(ss) and once again started fearfully flipping through the notebook.

"'One day, that person came over and reached out to help me, talentless piece of trash that I am'..."

Wow, you've gotten really humble. No need to put yourself down, Mr. Perfect Man!

As I predicted, the situation turned for the better, but I couldn't mask my surprise.

"'With their help, the creation of the magic item went smoothly. We completed it so easily it almost makes me wonder what was so hard about it to begin with. Yes, it's a truly wonderful circlet, if I do say so myself. I really am a genius! A perfect, talented, handsome genius!'"

Oh, gosh, now he's back to normal.

I didn't imagine he'd be able to snap out of it that quickly, but the writing didn't mention how long it'd been, so it made it seem like he got over his depression within a single day.

"'Upon completing the magic item, I once again reaffirmed my brilliance, but I also realized something very important. And that is...'"

The writing trailed off there, like it was trying to leave us in suspense, and it managed to make me tense up. And then, Magiluka turned to the next page...

"...'What would be the point of me becoming a woman?'" Magiluka read it out, looking very nettled.

"That's what we'd like to know..." I agreed, tilting my head in confusion.

Magiluka sighed and closed the notebook, giving up on reading any longer, and looked up at the ceiling for a moment. I watched her do so, sympathizing. After a few minutes, Magiluka looked back down at the notebook and began leafing through it again.

"'Once I realized that the magic item I'd gone to such lengths to make had no

purpose, I left it in a box. But one day, something strange happened. I started hearing voices—voices saying use me, coming from the closed box where I'd left the item! When I listened to the voice, I found myself opening the lid to the box, but when I realized what I was doing, I immediately closed it. What is the meaning of this?! It's terrifying! I thought about destroying the circlet, but I fear to look at it. So, I decided to seal the room containing the circlet. It must not be dug up. And if, for whatever reason, it is, no one must be allowed near the circlet. Promise me that!' ...And that's where it ends." Magiluka snapped the notebook shut and looked at me tiredly. "Who was this person?"

"Hmm. Someone very stupid?" I suggested.

"Both his reason for making the magic item and how he ended up disposing of it... How did he not immediately see the problem? He must have been the type to not think his actions through and do things haphazardly, or as soon as they come to mind. He buried the notebook telling people not to dig up the room along with the room, inside the box of the thing he was trying to hide! What was he trying to achieve, really?!"

"Maybe he read it after he was done and was so embarrassed by the second half that he decided to hide it here so no one else would find it? And he forgot he wrote the warning there," I shrugged, trying to find logic in Mr. Perfect Man's baffling actions.

"It's possible that since it's an item for turning men into women, it's an item only usable by men," Magiluka speculated. "That would explain why you didn't hear its voice, Lady Mary."

"That sounds likely."

"Anyway, the owner of this notebook is the source behind this whole story, so I think our fastest solution would be to find him and ask for a way to take off the circlet," Magiluka concluded, holding onto the notebook.

I had no objections to her sound plan, so I simply nodded.

"Let's leave for now and make sure nobody accesses this room. Is that acceptable, Your Highness?"

She turned her eyes to the prince(ss), who nodded.

“Yes, let’s call it a day and investigate this place again tomorrow,” Reifus brought a hand to his mouth and said pensively. “If people in the palace realize I’ve become like this, it might cause a panic, so I’ll try not to meet anyone from there for today. Especially not my mother or father.”

“You can do that?” I asked, half aware that this was a bit of a rude question.

“Yes. We have multiple hiding places outside the palace in case we need to stay somewhere without being seen. Well, most of them were made by my father, and he’s told me about some of them. He said I might need them someday.”

I didn’t bother asking why the skirt-chasing king decided to make so many unofficial hiding spots. Whatever his stated intentions were, his real reasons for it were almost certainly no good...

With our course of action decided, I could only sigh upon reassessing just how messy the situation we were in really was. If it were Sacher who’d ended up becoming a girl, we wouldn’t have to walk on eggshells so much, but it had to be the prince, of all people.

Suddenly, a scary realization dawned on me. *Hold on. Snow dug this place up, and I’m the one who found the box. If we don’t fix this fast, it’ll put us in a really, really bad position.*

Realizing that I would be seen as responsible for this, I became terrified. Reifus and Magiluka left the room, ignorant of my fears. When we returned to the surface, the area was clear of people thanks to Sacher and Safina setting up the area as off-limits, so no outsiders spotted Reifus yet. At worst, if anyone did happen to see him, it would’ve been from afar, so they wouldn’t have been able to actually recognize him.

We brought Reifus a cloak with a hood. Much like I had during the mandrake incident, we figured we’d hide his situation like this. With this, we made our way to the old campus building. Incidentally, Tutte, Sacher, and Safina were all surprised when they saw the prince, as one might expect—however, Sacher seemed maybe more in despair than merely just surprised.

“Don’t tell me I’m the only guy left in the group...” He fell to his knees and whispered.

And indeed, he was the last remaining male in the group. I guess this technically made him the head of a harem, which was something he ought to have been happy about, but for some reason, he looked like it was the end of the world. *Weirdo.*

But, either way, we were still neck deep in trouble, so we needed to find some way to fix this mess by tomorrow—once people started asking how this happened, I was really going to be in hot water...

With that thought in mind, I went back home and began to prepare for tomorrow...but the following day, I found myself sharing a table with Queen Ilysha.

God... Don't tell me we've been found out already!

6. Reifus to Rain?

After taking an elegant sip of tea, the queen placed her cup back on its saucer. The gentle clinking of porcelain made me jolt.

"Hee hee, no need to act so reserved, Mary. I didn't call you here to blame you."

"Y-Yes, ma'am," I squeaked.

She told me not to act reserved, but I couldn't help it. It was just me and her there. Normally, I'd have had Magiluka attend with me, but this time I was told to come alone, and it was a school day, so there were classes to attend in the Academy. I couldn't very well drag a class master along with me for this.

Tutte was nearby, but still a fair distance away, so it was just me and the queen here.

No, there's one more...well, not person here.

I hung my head and glanced at my right hand, which was tightly gripping a large, fluffy tail. This was, of course, Snow's tail. The divine beast was currently seated next to me, its head hung, placing it at the same height as mine. She was, after all, one of the reasons this had happened...

I figured she'd keep her cool because she's a divine beast, and I thought

having her around would help me calm down, but...

“Wh-What do I do, Mary?! The queen’s like, really scary! Her smile’s so ominous! Do we apologize?! Let’s apologize right now!”

As it turned out, the mighty divine beast was cowering even harder than I was. So, who wouldn’t tense up in this situation? Anyone would, I guarantee it. Especially not after the queen had alluded to “blaming” me.

Since she knows about it, is this the final episode?

The way the queen looked at me with a smile chilled me to the bone. I couldn’t even look her in the eye, and my gaze was wandering in every other direction.

“I have to say, it’s my first time seeing a divine beast. She looks very dignified, and her eyes look very wise,” the queen said, praising Snow.

Snow, however...

“Noooooooo, don’t look at me! I-I-I-I’m not at fault here! Mary made me do it!”

...was shouting words lacking in any dignity or wisdom in my head. I couldn’t ignore how she was trying to throw me under the bus, so I whispered at her, “Hey, why are you trying to pin all the blame on me?!”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Mary? Did the beast say something?” Her Majesty asked curiously.

“Ah, yes!” I replied on reflex, panicking. “She said—”

Bam! Snow hit her paw over my face, cutting me off.

“Tanks, Schnow...” I murmured, my nose squished.

“You’re welcome.”

“My, you two do get along well,” the queen giggled.

Seeing her smile made us feel more and more embarrassed, and we began to hang our heads in shame instead of fear. As I was starting to wonder what the queen was planning, a group of maids approached.

“We’ve brought her over, Your Majesty.”

The maids were spread out like they were trying to hide someone in the middle of their formation—actually, more like they were trying to keep whoever was in the center of their group from running—and they approached with perfectly coordinated motions. When they reached us, they broke up the formation naturally, revealing the person they were leading along.

“Oh, goodness me!” The queen said, sounding delighted upon seeing them.

I, by contrast, felt like I’d just been nailed into my chair. She was clad in a beautiful dress, her golden hair sparkling in the light as it trailed in the wind. Her facial features were the very image of a fairytale princess. Her appearance was totally immaculate, save for her very disturbed expression and the way she awkwardly scratched her cheek.

“Y-Your Highness...” I muttered, overwhelmed by the cute face before me that still had a shadow of the prince’s features. *Since Reifus is here, there’s no doubt the queen knows about what happened...*

“I tried not to be spotted, but she found me out immediately...” Reifus said with a dry laugh.

“Rain, you’re not being very ladylike.” The queen’s tone shifted from that of a satisfied child to a scolding parent’s.

“But Mother—”

“You mean Mama, correct?” she said, wagging a finger like she was chastising her.

The prince(ss) sighed in resignation and gave up on arguing. From the tones of their voices, it was clear they’d had this exchange several times already.

I apprehensively made to ask the question that came to mind.

“Um, ah... My apologies for cutting in...” I muttered.

“I said you don’t have to act so reserved, Mary. What would you like to say?”

“U-Um... Wh-Who’s Rain?” Indeed—the Queen had called Reifus ‘Rain.’

“Oh, yes. I assumed that calling her Reifus wouldn’t do now that she’s a girl, so I changed her name,” the queen said happily. “When I was pregnant with Reifus, I said I’d call the baby Rain if it was a girl, so it all turned out nicely. Just

think of it as a nickname.”

Hearing this, I filed the prince under “Lady Rain” in my head until further notice. Lady Rain sighed and let the maids guide her to a chair. She walked with very stiff, awkward steps—this was likely the first time she’d ever had to wear a dress, so it was only natural when she’d been a boy until just yesterday. If anything, the fact she was pulling it off with the elegance of a noble lady creeped me out a little.

With more people in the area, I was able to somehow regain my composure and turn to look at Lady Rain, who was still fidgeting uncomfortably. Her face was quite androgynous even as a boy, but now she had the inherent cuteness of a girl. She was honestly pretty enough to charm even me, a fellow girl—and looking at her proportions made me want to grumble.

Impossible... I can’t be losing to the prince too! I thought to myself, outraged by how certain areas of Lady Rain’s body stood out.

“Now, with Rain here, let’s get down to business,” the queen said, eyeing Lady Rain with satisfied eyes. “She told me what happened. I was surprised to hear such a magic item exists. And, well, I was surprised it was you who found it, Lady Mary.”

“Ah, erm, eh... No, it wasn’t me who found it, it was Snow,” I said.

“Hey, hold it! I’m the one who found the place, but you’re the one who discovered that weird item! Correct yourself! I demand you correct yourself!” Snow complained, pushing her face toward me.

“Oh, quiet down. Stop screaming in my head...” I pushed her face away and massaged my temples, trying to calm my headache. I’d nearly forgotten I was in the presence of the queen.

“So it’s true, only you can hear her, Mary. If I didn’t know better, it would look, well... How do I put it...” The queen trailed off, confused as to how to word it, and glanced at Lady Rain.

Yeah, I know, it would make me look crazy.

“But, either way, you can both rest easy. Like I said, I’m not blaming you for this. In fact, I think this is all quite amusi—”

“Huh?” I stopped arguing with Snow and looked at the queen, confused.

“Nothing, never mind.” The queen trailed off there.

“But Mother, how did you realize when it only happened yesterday...?” Lady Rain asked in my place.

She was right, it really was too soon. The queen looked at her, displeased, likely unhappy that she’d been called “Mother” over “Mama” as she’d asked.

“...Whenever you try to avoid me, you act just like the king, so I immediately assumed you must have done something wrong,” the queen said, sipping on her tea gracefully. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, I suppose. I know all of the king’s hiding spots, and while I don’t comment on them, I do have them watched. Hee hee, you should probably realize that there’s no keeping secrets from me, Reifus... Pardon, Rain.”

I had to pity the skirt-chaser king after hearing that. Lady Rain went very pale, and as a girl with many secrets to keep, I was pretty rattled by what the queen had said too.

“I understand... But why do I have to dress like this and change my name?” Lady Rain asked, clearly displeased with her current situation.

I wondered whether if we cut her hair and put her in men’s clothing if we’d be able to somehow pass her off as a prince. I looked her over with that thought in mind, but her proportions and perfectly sculpted features made me quickly discard that idea. Anyone who’d look at her would instantly assume she’s a girl. That magic item truly wasn’t to be trifled with...

“Well, you see...” The queen took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and set her cup down in its saucer. The silence that followed was quite heavy, giving the impression she had some important reason. Sensing this, Lady Rain lost most of her anger and intensity and watched the queen, awaiting her answer.

The queen finally opened her eyes with quite the earnest face. I straightened out my back and swallowed nervously. “Recently, whenever I’ve heard of Mary’s exploits, it’s made me think to myself, ‘I do want a daughter’... Then, all of a sudden, you became a wonderful girl, Reifus. I think this is divine guidance, and I intend to relish my time with you as my daughter from now on. ♪” The

queen offered her utterly unhinged reply with a brilliant grin.

Lady Rain and I stared at her blankly in silence for a few seconds.

Is she saying she's actually really happy about her son turning into her daughter? That she's having fun with this?

My frozen thoughts ground back into motion, and I recognized that she didn't regard this incident as a bad thing, which was a relief.

"Mother..." Lady Rain looked at her with peevish eyes.

"Hee hee. Oh, come now, I was joking," she giggled, amused.

No—from the look in your eyes, no, you weren't.

I denied that idea with absolute certainty.

I think the queen has spent so much time with Emilia that Emilia's way of thinking has rubbed off on her... What a surprise. Recalling that tomboyish princess, I discovered a new, unexpected facet of the queen.

"Oh, and Lady Mary, I do expect you and your friends to treat Rain as a girl," the queen said, turning to look at me like she'd just remembered to say this.

"Huh? Me and my friends? As in, Magiluka and the others?" I confirmed.

"Correct. And unless the situation absolutely requires you to, if you treat her like a boy..."

"Y-Yes? What happens if we treat her like a boy...?" I asked, swallowing nervously.

"I'll give you a spanking, ♪" the queen said with a graceful smile.

I could only nod wordlessly. It was clear that she would stop at nothing to have her way, and in my position, I was powerless to resist.

"Right, so, with all that in mind, we'll look into this magic item on our side while keeping it secret," the queen continued. "But Mary, I expect you'll help too."

"H-Huh? Um, yes!" I squeaked, momentarily startled before I managed a proper response.

“I’m sure you can resolve this. I’ll be counting on you.”

I honestly would have preferred not to have been counted on for this, but I couldn’t very much bow out since I’d been a part of why this incident had happened in the first place. I had to work to cancel out my blunder.

All we have to do is remove a magic item someone made. It can’t possibly get any worse than this, for sure, I thought to myself optimistically, with a good serving of wishful thinking. In any case, this time, I would have to go about solving this incident more assertively than usual.

7. Ongoing Princessification

The next day, I decided to get to the bottom of everything that was happening so we could fix it. The first order of business was to discover who Mr. Perfect Man was. According to the headmaster, students like that weren't uncommon, with one or two of them cropping up every year, for better or for worse. I personally had a hard time believing there were that many arrogant people... Apparently, in most cases, their confidence ended up evaporating once reality hit them in the face, and they would then blend in with the rest of the student body.

"Ugh... Looking for someone whose name you don't even know is tough. Having an ace detective would help right around now..." I grumbled to myself as I examined the underground room again, with no one but Tutte behind me.

The reason I was here alone was that the headmaster had placed me in charge of this investigation, meaning I was allowed to skip classes unless something very important was being taught. The same was true of Rain, who was thoroughly sifting through the headmaster's material storeroom for any information that might connect to Mr. Perfect Man and his circlet.

"There really aren't enough people investigating this issue, but then again, we can't let this become too big of a deal..." I kept grumbling to myself as I wandered around the room.

"Did you find something, Lady Mary?" Tutte, who was cleaning out the room while searching, paused and asked.

"No, nothing. There's seriously nothing here. If he'd have left behind some of his work tools, maybe we'd be able to figure something out..."

The room really was empty, save for the box that'd had the circlet. The only other things in this room were old shelves, tables and chairs. If I could identify the age of the room and furniture based on just what was here, I'd be putting master detectives to shame.

Lady Rain said the queen called over expert magus smith for their opinion on the circlet, speaking of discerning age. They said its design didn't look very old,

and it was likely made just a few decades ago, but they couldn't examine it any further while it was still on her. They were afraid to try, as who knew what might happen to the prince's body.

They suggested bringing an investigation team to the Academy, but that would definitely blow the situation way out of proportion, so we decided we'd investigate the matter ourselves with the staff's help.

"Miss Mary? Are you there?" I heard a cute voice call out to me.

It took me a second to recognize who it was and reply.

"...O-Oh, yes, Lady Rain, I'm here. I'll head out now, so please wait." I hurriedly made to leave the room, realizing who it was.

Much like when we'd come in, I didn't use the rope ladder, instead opting for levitation magic to float along the shaft while carrying Tutte. Lady Rain stepped away from the pit so as to not get in our way.

"Thank you for waiting, Lady Rain. Did you need me for something?"

"Yes. I have to attend class now, so I thought I should let you know."

"Is it some kind of important class?" I asked, wondering what could be more important than the investigation right now.

"Umm... I don't think it is, but Mother told me that it's the one class I must attend, no matter what, and she pressured the headmaster to ensure I do..." Lady Rain giggled wryly. "He begged me to come to class, even if all I do is watch from afar."

"What class is it?"

"Hmmm, well, I don't know, because I've never had to attend it before. Apparently, it's a class teaching ladylike etiquette."

I felt a headache coming on.

Your Majesty... This is an emergency. What are you thinking at a time like this? Wasting your time on having the prince learn ladylike manners and etiquette...

"Very well. I will escort you, then. I'm sure a lot of this is new to you, so you'll

be very confused."

"I appreciate it."

And so, we had no choice but to go along with the queen's "Lady Rain Princessification Project."

But really... We don't have time for this right now!

"Everyone, settle down."

The teacher's quiet voice filled the room elegantly, prompting the female students to stop glancing back and keep their eyes on the front of the classroom. Their curiosity was understandable, since the princess was standing there—and it was all the more understandable to see me there, a girl who had already completed the class during my first year.

That is to say, all the young ladies here were first-years.

"We have someone very important attending today's lecture, but I want you all to focus on class and not do anything to disgrace yourselves."

I can hear her voice even all the way here in the back of the class. Miss Amanda is as strict as ever... Your Majesty, of all the instructors, did you have to have Lady Rain attend Miss Amanda's class? I just hope the princess doesn't end up cracking under the pressure...

I straightened out my back and held back a sigh as I watched Miss Amanda reprimand the students. She was famous when it came to teaching lady's etiquette, and rumor had it she was even involved in educating the queen herself. She was dressed in all black, and she had pretty, sleek, raven-colored hair. Still, her outfit wasn't plain. The fabrics were quite visibly high-class, and what few accessories she wore had a matching design that came together to make her quite pretty. Despite being a madam in her forties, her womanly aura hadn't diminished one bit—she had an intense air about her that frankly intimidated me.

Honestly speaking, Miss Amanda was a stern, scary teacher. While I could see what the queen was trying to achieve by having Lady Rain be in Miss Amanda's class, we were lucky that the headmaster had only asked that Lady Rain watch the lesson instead of taking Miss Amanda's course directly.

If Miss Amanda started teaching her, she'd be a perfect lady in a matter of days... Scary.

Hiding my relief, I glanced over at Lady Rain, who was sitting beside me—then, I had to double take and outright stare at her. She was listening to the lesson with utmost seriousness.

"E-Erm, Lady Rain, are you interested in this?" I whispered to her.

"...I'm not so much interested as I am surprised. I'm starting to think that the way you ladies have to conduct yourselves is very demanding," she answered, looking at me. "All these things I wouldn't know as a man are quite illuminating." With that said, she turned her eyes to the teacher again.

Oh, right... She always was highly curious and challenging herself to experience all sorts of things—that's why she tried her hand at running the Academy Festival. Being so earnest and serious at heart, she always rose to the occasion the best she possibly could.

Surely Her Majesty didn't decide to use her own child's personality against her? Surely not, aha ha ha...

Filled with guilt about having turned the prince into a girl and having effectively caused this whole thing, I felt driven to put her back the way she was as soon as possible. I couldn't sit by and watch her get converted into a girl even further. However, in this situation, all I could do was sweat bullets as I watched Lady Rain intently absorb the lecture and pray that she wouldn't become any more entangled in this.

***

A few days passed. Our investigation turned up no leads—we weren't any closer to figuring out who made the circlet. I was honestly starting to panic.

Having once again found nothing, I returned to the old campus building's lounge to look for a certain someone, and I ran into Safina instead.

"Huh? Safina, where's Lady Rain?" I asked.

"She went back to the main campus building to attend Miss Amanda's lesson."

I gave a casual “Oh” and had nearly settled into a chair before what Safina just said had really settled in.

“Huh?! She went to that class alone?!” I asked in alarm as I drew toward her.

“U-Um, yes, she went alone...” Safina replied, a bit taken aback by my aggressive question.

“Oh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this...” I said with a solemn look on my face.

“Lady Mary, i-is there a problem?” Safina suddenly looked anxious.

“Well, hopefully I’m just imagining things, but I’ll go check on her.” I turned around to head out the door.

“I-I’ll come along!” Safina hurried to her feet and followed me. I must have startled her a great deal.

With Safina and Tutte in tow, I jogged as quickly as appearances would allow to the classroom. We didn’t outright run so as to not draw Miss Amanda’s attention. Soon enough, we approached the room, trying to calm our racing hearts, and we heard girlish screeching of excitement from the inside.

Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no! I sped up my steps, my face turning more tense.

“L-Lady Mary... Did something happen to Lady Rain?” Safina asked anxiously, noticing the change in my expression.

At last, we reached the classroom, where...I saw it.

“Your progress over such a short period is wonderful, Lady Rain. Your posture, your walk, they’re all quite graceful.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. However, work on adopting a more ladylike way of talking. You’re being too uncouth.”

Hearing Miss Amanda praise someone for once made the students raise their voices in admiration and respect...and the student accepting said praise was none other than Lady Rain. She was conducting herself with none of the awkwardness she had the other day, looking like a proper, elegant lady.

“...We’re too laaaaate!” I crumbled to the corridor floor.

“H-Huh?!”

“Lady Mary?!”

Safina and Tutte hurried to my side. I could see the queen grinning victoriously in my mind’s eye.

“Wh-What happened?!”

As I sat there at a complete loss, I heard someone approaching with surprise in their voice. I turned to look and saw Magiluka, eyeing me puzzledly.

“Ha ha, Magiluka...” I laughed dryly and signaled for her to look inside the room with my eyes.

Upon doing this, Magiluka trembled and nearly fell backwards, only for someone standing behind her to catch her.

“...What’s the problem?” The person that caught her asked with a familiarly emotionless voice.

I turned to look toward who spoke and recognized the lady standing there. There was no mistaking her triangular fox ears and fluffy tail.

“Miss Fifi!”

Standing there was Fifi, the foxfolk beastwoman and apprentice of the Relirex Kingdom’s greatest magus smith, Girtz. So it was that the “expert” who could resolve this case dramatically entered the scene.

8. The Savior Appears

We moved to the lounge in the old campus building for the time being.

“It’s been a while, Miss Fifi.” I tried to control my excitement as I greeted her.

“...Yes, it has.” She bowed her head politely before sitting across from me.

Her voice and expression are as emotionless as ever...

“What are you doing here at the Academy?”

“...I came here to deliver the magic items you asked us to repair,” she replied plainly.

I looked at Magiluka. I did remember her making that kind of request.

“Wasn’t the princess supposed to deliver them? She looked very insistent on it,” I said.

“Her Highness couldn’t come,” Magiluka explained. “According to Miss Fifi, Lady Elizabeth caught Her Highness and forced her to go do work she’s been neglecting.”

Fifi nodded in affirmation.

I see Emilia hasn’t changed... I can imagine it happening.

The image of a certain scary ice witch grabbing a frozen Emilia with her iron claw grip made me shiver a little.

“...I came here at Lady Elizabeth’s command, such that I could handle the situation in case there were any defects in the items,” Fifi said.

To me, the timing felt too favorable. Maybe this was just a coincidence, but what if Lady Elizabeth had heard what’d happened to the prince and sent Fifi to help us? After all, I knew Lady Elizabeth was secretly communicating with Her Majesty, so maybe the queen came to her for help.

Well, I’ll just assume this is a coincidence and carry on. I instantly decided to rely on the aid of this genius magus smith.

“Good timing, Miss Fifi. We need your help,” I said.

Just then, Lady Rain entered the lounge, having finished her class. Sacher was with her, apparently having ran into her halfway here. He looked quite restless.

“Hello, Miss Fifi,” Lady Rain said with her usual tone. “I heard why you’re here. Thank you for coming from afar to deliver the items.”

While her tone of voice was normal, her gestures were very different. She didn’t fidget in her skirt like yesterday—she was walking elegantly, her steps making the hems of her skirt dance.

“...Hey. Is it just me, or did the pri—I mean, did Lady Rain become more princess-like since the last time I saw her?” Sacher asked fearfully.

I glared at him before he let slip the forbidden word, which made him quickly

reword himself. But I did relate to his confusion. The change was so swift I had to fearfully acknowledge Miss Amanda's teaching skills.

Fifi looked at Lady Rain, who'd greeted her, and cocked her head in confusion.

"...Do I know you?"

"I know it might be hard to believe, but that's the first prince of the Aldian Kingdom, Reifus. Due to unfortunate circumstances, he's been turned into a girl and goes by Rain now," Magiluka explained.

"...Turned into a girl? Through magic? No, a spell wouldn't last this long. So, is it a magic item? From the looks of it, I'd say that this circlet seems suspicious."

The expert was instantly showing her knowledge, identifying the cause of the problem right away. Seeing this encouraged me that perhaps we were one step closer to solving the matter.

"That's right, the circlet is what did it. But I can't take it off," Rain said with a troubled expression, placing a hand on her cheek in a bothered manner. It was a very adorable gesture.

Miss Amanda even managed to ingrain gestures like this into her. What a fearsome lady...

"...That's fascinating. Can I examine it?"

Despite remaining completely expressionless, Fifi's curiosity as a craftsman was clearly stimulated. She drew close to Lady Rain, seeking her consent. Having no reason to refuse, Lady Rain sat on a chair and entrusted herself to Fifi, who began her appraisal.

"...Yes, it really is unremovable," Fifi said, examining the circlet. "It's like a curse, in a sense."

"This is a curse?" Lady Rain asked.

"...If I had to say, it's held in place by...obsession, or something of the sort. It's quite tricky."

"So, you can't take it off?" I urged Fifi to give her answer, seeing that her explanation was heading in a clearly ominous direction.

“...Not forcibly. There’s no telling what might happen if we do. However, it’s not permanently unremovable, so I recommend you try to remove it in a legitimate manner.”

“But we don’t know what the ‘legitimate’ way of taking it off is. Can’t you help us here?” I begged her.

“...I can’t do anything, I’m afraid. I peered inside the circlet, but it’s fundamentally different from the kind of magic items we make. The best way to describe it would be heresy. You can’t even call this a magic item. It’s defectively made, if you ask me.” Fifi finding fault in someone else’s work was quite unusual.

“Well, apparently, a student from this academy made it,” I explained.

“...This academy? You mean a human made this?”

“Y-Yes,” I said, unsure of what Fifi meant by that question.

“...That can’t be,” Fifi asserted. “A human, and a student without expert knowledge at that, couldn’t possibly make something like this.”

That made something click for me. *Didn’t the diary mention someone else? Some other person who’d gotten involved in the circlet’s creation and helped complete it?*

“A diary from the person who made it mentioned someone who helped them make it.”

“...Then maybe that other person was who actually made the circlet.”

The fact we gained new information that only made our search more complicated made me feel like we’d never finish this.

“Hmm... You called it heresy earlier, Miss Fifi, so does that mean you discerned something about how this circlet works?” Magiluka said in my place, since I was too dazed to ask anything else.

“...Hmm. Well, this circlet was made using reckless techniques that completely go against the logic of the demon magus smith techniques I learned, which is why it can exhibit such unusual powers. But still, it’s heresy.”

Although she’d said it with a blank face, Fifi’s wordy explanation implied that

she was quite upset by this.

She's scary when she's mad... I don't want to get caught in the crossfire here.

"Um, would you be so kind as to explain in further detail?" Magiluka asked carefully, sensing Fifi's foul mood.

"...This is a technique called 'Sprite's Mischief.' It operates on heretical, fairytale-esque logic that ignores our common sense. It's also frowned upon by magus smiths who learned from the demons because it's *their* technique."

"Whose technique?" I asked curiously, despite the clearly ominous air behind her words.

"...Sprite's Mischief is only used by a single race. The elves are involved."

While I appeared to be stunned speechless by Fifi's words, on the inside, I was very much going, "Oh my gosh, aaaah, elves!"

"E-Elves...?" Magiluka asked after a few moments of silence.

"...Mmhmm. Yes, for certain. The core parts of this item were made by an elven magus smith. They added the Sprite's Mischief enchantment, which makes the circlet unremovable."

The elves... I did remember hearing magus smiths are primarily elves and demons. *So, the second race that deals with this art was involved in this incident. I wasn't expecting this.*

Much like the demons, the elves didn't interact much with mankind. The fact there were elves in this academy at some point was quite the surprise.

"So, we just need to ask the headmaster if there were ever any elves attending the Academy. This is a big hint," Lady Rain said, detailing our next course of action.

Even the headmaster, as forgetful as he might be, would surely remember something as unusual as elves visiting the Academy. We instantly moved to act.

"Elves in the Academy, you say...? Hmm..."

The headmaster sat across from us in his office in the clock tower as we asked

him. He closed his eyes and stroked his beard, his eyes fixed up at the ceiling.

“Hmm, yes, there was an elf in the Academy once. I don’t remember exactly when it was, but there was one here. She was quite the pretty girl. Yes, yes, she had quite the curvy figure, heh heh.”

While I was taken aback by what the headmaster’s memory was focused on, it did tell us we were dealing with a lady elf.

“Why was there an elf in the Academy? Did you call her here?” Magiluka asked, fixing a cold glare on him.

“No, I have no connections with the elves. She simply appeared one day, suddenly.”

“Suddenly...?”

“Oh, yes, she said she was wandering the land, going about teaching promising young men and women the art of the magus smith, and she asked if the Academy could temporarily hire her to be a teacher. Just like nowadays, there aren’t many human magus smiths, so we were grateful to have someone to teach us this nascent art and agreed. I think at the time...”

The headmaster got to his feet halfway through his explanation and started rummaging through a large wooden crate.

“Ah, yes, there it is.”

The headmaster produced a pipe of some kind from the crate and walked over to us. Magiluka took the pipe, checked its insides, and carefully pulled out a slip of paper from within it.

“What’s this?” She asked after examining it for a few seconds, eyeing the headmaster suspiciously.

“She said it was a contract. Apparently, she wasn’t satisfied unless we formalized it with a written, signed contract. Whenever she did anything, she always demanded a contract. She was a bit annoy—ahem, formal, but she was quite the good girl who had a passion for teaching and helping the students. And my, was she pretty... Heh heh.”

The headmaster remembered something and started grinning again. No

doubt some aspects of that lady elf that were not at all relevant to our problem... I decided not to ask about that.

"Anyway," the headmaster finally carried on, "that was how the Academy had our one valuable encounter with an elf. And after she left, she left me one last contract as a memento. I just remembered that."

"Yes, it is signed by you," Magiulka said, examining the contract. "And there's another name here... Shelly? And the contract has the date and year written on it like it's supposed to. We might be able to figure out who made it!"

This discovery progressed our investigation by leaps and bounds, and it was all thanks to Fifi. However, Fifi sadly wasn't present for this. Instead, she decided to tour the capital and observe the local magus smith's work.

I could only hope her criticism wouldn't be so scathing so as to break the hearts of the human magus smiths... I could easily imagine her doing so without even trying.

In any case, with this, we gained headway on the prince genderflip incident. All that remained was to either find that elf, Shelly, or use the contract date to figure out who Mr. Perfect Man was and have them remove the circlet.

I hope this takes care of things. Like, really, this is a close one. Any longer, and the prince will be making the change to princess permanent! This was what I was really relieved about, more so than solving the mystery itself.

9. Can We Make It?

The following day, we began investigating our newfound information. Apparently, ten or so years ago, the female elf Shelly had appeared and become a teacher at the Academy. Not much was known about her. Like the headmaster said, she was a vagabond wandering the land, and no one seemed to know where she'd come from or where she went.

Needless to say, there was no lucky development where she just happened to be in the capital right now. Since it was related to things outside the Academy, Lady Rain asked the queen to investigate it, and her information was reliable.

As such, I focused on asking the other teachers about the events of the time in an attempt to find Mr. Perfect Man.

It's like some kind of detective drama. Like, sooner or later I'll go 'The culprit is in this room!'

Sadly, realistically speaking, I didn't think I'd get a chance to say that line, especially since the culprit in question wasn't actively hiding their identity.

"It looks like Shelly the elf really left a big impression on that teacher," Tutte, who was following behind me, said with a disappointed look on her face. "So much so that they hardly remember anything else from that period." Indeed, all the teachers remembered an elf being here, but they couldn't recall any of their students from that year.

"I was hoping we'd find him in no time now... Bleh. Her being an elf actually makes things harder for us."

But as I slumped my shoulders in disappointment...

"Lady Maaaaary!" Safina ran over to me adorably.

Classes must have ended. I raised my head and greeted her with a smile. "Oh, hello, Safina. Finished with classes for the day?"

"Yes. But listen, during class, I asked Miss Iks about that male student!"

Safina was trying to help me in her own way, investigating on her own. Thankful for her efforts, I patted her on the head.

"Thank you, Safina."

"Eh heh heh... Oh, so, what she said was that this male student kept bothering the girls, so we should ask Miss Amanda about him."

"Miss Amanda?" I repeated.

Indeed, Miss Amanada, who was strict and very particular about the Academy's public morals, would keep an eye out for students like that and possibly remember them. She was something of a superwoman with perfect memory who always knew all her students' names. In that case, Mr. Perfect Man's reckless, ego-driven activities could have very well ended up on her radar.

“So where’s Miss Amanda right now?”

“I don’t think she’s teaching any classes right now,” Tutte said instantly.

For some reason, she had all the teachers’ schedules memorized.

I guess we have our own superwoman right here!

“Then where should she be when not in class?” I asked Tutte and Safina, who both cocked their heads, confused.

Yeah, figures.

I sighed. But just as we were at a loss...

“L-L-L-L-L-Lady Mary!”

Sacher ran over to us, greatly alarmed. I had to wonder what could make Sacher so startled.

“What’s the matter, Sir Sacher?”

“L-L-Lady Rain, she, she—” Sacher said in a panic, which made me tense up in turn.

“D-Did something happen to Lady Rain?!”

Sacher said to follow him and ran off back the way he came. I followed.

But Lady Rain should be having free time without classes right now... Did something happen to the circlet?!

I followed Sacher, all the while trying to calm my racing heart. But what we found when we reached our destination was...

“What’s the matter, Lady Regalia?” Miss Amanda asked me, not seeming particularly perturbed. Sitting across from her at a desk was Lady Rain, apparently working on something. When I realized *what* she was working on, I shuddered.

Embroidery?! Lady Rain is doing embroidery?!

Embroidery was a common hobby for young ladies, and wasn’t an unusual sight at all, but the problem was that the Aldian prince was the one doing it.

“M-Miss Amanda, what are you doing? I thought you didn’t have any classes

right now!”

“The queen personally requested that I give Lady Rain private lessons,” Miss Amanda answered.

“Private...lessons.”

Those words made the queen’s face flash in my mind, and her visage was letting out a devilish chuckle. *It seems that her meddling is getting out of hand...*

“Lady Rain is quite talented. She’s been learning everything quite quickly, and I intend to put everything I have into fashioning her into a truly elegant princess.”

Miss Amanda, who was usually quite expressionless, said this with an oddly excited expression.

Oh, no, her teacher’s passion is triggered. She won’t stop even if we tell her Rain is actually the prince!

Half resigned, I glanced over at Lady Rain as she worked. Even though she was handling a pretty difficult embroidery pattern, she was going about it smoothly.

Is this princess actually a little too girly for her own good?

Seeing this left me confused and disturbed. I was losing to her with my figure, and now it turned out I was losing in terms of my young lady gracefulness and girliness too...

“Oh, Mary.” Lady Rain finally looked up and acknowledged me, likely having been too absorbed with her work to notice me sooner.

“H-Huh... M-Mary?!” I repeat her words and wobble over to her, surprised.

“Heheh, I never knew embroidery really takes so much focus. I learned something new.” Lady Rain brought a hand to her mouth and smiled beautifully, her golden hair shining in the sun.

She was truly the perfect image of a princess, worthy of being called the Golden Princess. But there was one thing I couldn’t stomach that easily.

“What’s wrong, Mary?” Lady Rain asked, cocking her head curiously. “You’re making the same face as Magiluka.”

Cheese and crackers! Why does everything you do have to look so cute?!

Her cuteness aside, Lady Rain's words made me look around in a hurry, and I spotted a familiar girl with blonde ringlets sitting limply on a chair.

"M-Magiluka..." I approached her fearfully, put my hands on her shoulders, and tried shaking her, but she didn't respond.

"It's over... It's all over. Who knows what will happen to him if he goes back to the way he was. A-At worst... The way His Highness speaks..." Magiluka mumbled to herself, speaking to the same fear I was harboring.

"Magiluka, get it together. We can't give up. We can still make it. We can still turn this around!" I shook off the terrible premonition that made me shudder and shook Magiluka, trying to rouse her. "We just need to resolve this swiftly! The way is open! We just need to find a way to tear this off of Lady Rain's forehead!"

"F-F-Fine, I understand, just stop shaking me! My neck is about to snap!" Magiluka protested as I shook her harder than before.

She finally came to and made to get away from me. Realizing I was going a little too hard, I let go of her.

"Hee hee, what's wrong with you two? Why are you so flustered?" Lady Rain chuckled with a voice like the chirping of a small bird.

Seeing this gesture just made me panic even harder.

"Listen, you need to keep a firm hold on who you are. Remember, you're Prince Reifus Lukua Dalford. The prince! Remember that, please!" I whispered as firmly as possible, well aware that I couldn't very well shake her.

"W-Well, yes. You're right," Lady Rain said, her smile stiffening and a bead of nervous sweat running down her face.

Okay, the prince still remembers who he is. We need to get a move on and get the circlet off of Reifus before things really go off the rails.

I didn't expect having to get a grim reminder of how serious this situation was here. I turned to Miss Amanda and asked her about what we needed to know, trying to keep my mind off things.

“Miss Amanda, we apologize for making such an unacceptable display in front of you.” I apologized for my odd behavior.

“Indeed, that wasn’t behavior worthy of a Duke’s daughter. I’m sure you have your reasons, but since the queen requested that I do this, I can’t afford to cut corners. Plus, this does feel like a worthwhile case.”

“Yes, I understand. Um, but actually, I wanted to ask you about something else,” I said, trying to steer the conversation to the direction we needed. I asked if she remembered Mr. Perfect Man.

“...I do remember Shelly, the elf, yes. But a male student who bothered the female students during that year?” Miss Amanda closed her eyes like she was sifting through her memories. “Yes, there was one. Before Miss Shelly arrived, he was quite popular among the ladies, and he made impudent attempts to lay hands on some of the girls. But at some point, he started acting like a completely different person... Oh, but he did go back to his old ways shortly after Miss Shelly showed up.”

That matched the changing mental state I read in the diary.

“That’s him! Do you know who he is?”

“It was John Ordile, the son of Count Ordile.”

Ordile? Huh. I felt like I heard that name somewhere...

“From the Ordile County? To think the one who wrote that cra... Ahem, that diary’s author is Instructor Alice’s brother...” Magiluka whispered.

That solved my question—yes, Ordile, that was the surname of Instructor Alice, the slightly mentally unstable person who’d caused the undead incident.

Instructor Alice’s big brother, huh...? Between their grandfather and granddaughter, I guess that entire clan caused trouble for the Academy.

Laughing dryly, I considered our next course of action.

10. That’s What We Call a Lucky Lecher

Based on Fifi’s and Miss Amanda’s information, I came that much closer to

discovering Mr. Perfect Man's identity. I was only close, however, as I hadn't actually confirmed it was him. The prime suspect was one John Ordile, the son of Count Ordile. He was a man in his twenties, currently supporting his father's governor role and studying management so as to someday inherit the title.

I sent him a letter, asking about the circlet and the diary, but for some reason, I got no response. In place of a reply, Count Ordile sent back a letter full of excuses that made it clear he had no idea what the letter I sent was about. The letter said his son was currently occupied with running their domain and couldn't be contacted.

The excuse was so poor I had half a mind to send him a response that just said "As if!" and it only made my suspicion all the stronger. But the king and queen simply said, "Oh, well, not much to be done about that," and accepted the excuse blindly. Worse yet, the king started spoiling Lady Rain too. He bought her all sorts of things, acting like a father doting on his daughter.

We couldn't just sit by and wait. Every day that passed by was a day where Miss Amanda's education was sculpting Lady Rain into the daughter the queen wanted. We currently had Sacher following Lady Rain, since she said that only having girls around her made her get carried away by their girlish behavior. Sacher's opinion, meanwhile, was that being surrounded by just girls was scary... *Is that how it works?*

In any case, having a man nearby helped Lady Rain stay in touch with her inner boy.

Hmm, Lady Rain... She's got a talent for adapting, but that just means she gets carried away by what people around her are doing much too easily. Is that a good trait for royalty to have? I don't think so, so this might be a good lesson that'll teach her not to go with the flow too much.

Sighing, I made my way toward the old campus building's lounge.

"Aaaaah!"

But just as I approached, Sacher opened the door from the inside and bolted out of the room, screaming. He slammed the door behind him and leaned on it, breathing heavily.

“What’s gotten into you, Sir Sacher?” I asked dubiously.

Sacher noticed me and turned to make eye contact. His face was flushed red, and his eyes were darting in every direction.

“Ah, oh, Lady Mary. W-Well, you see...” Sacher stammered, unable to compose a complete sentence.

I looked at him, baffled, and assumed that since he was there, Lady Rain was likely nearby. I walked past him and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” I heard Lady Rain say from inside.

A maid opened the door from the inside, but once I came in...

“Pardon me, Lady...Raaaaain?”

I froze. Lady Rain was naked from the shoulder down, surrounded by maids that were wiping her body off. She was likely sweaty from classes, and her melons were overflowing from her undergarments.

Okay, no, I did not just actually see that. A trick of the light. I mean, they can’t possibly look any bigger than they do over her clothes...

“Lady Mary?” Lady Rain asked, baffled.

“...Excuse me.” I said, calmly closing the door.

I turned to look at Sacher, who was still trying to catch his breath in a panic.

“Congratulations, Sir Sacher. You’re now officially a light novel protagonist,” I said with a cold glare.

“What’s a light novel? What’s a protagonist?! That wasn’t my fault! I knocked and she said I could come in! And then...” Sacher continued to ramble defensively.

However, my cold glare wasn’t because of him, but rather it was because what I’d just seen had left me very bitter and frustrated—but I certainly wasn’t going to say it out loud.

Maybe it was just the common sense (or lack thereof) of royalty, but Lady Rain had no shame about having others see her undressed. Or maybe it was simply because Lady Rain was Sir Reifus on the inside, so having her upper half

bare didn’t register as improper to her. It really didn’t matter which it was.

Either way, after returning from class, Sacher was fortunate enough to become a lucky lecher, which would normally be a joyous occasion for any boy. I, however, received psychic damage by walking into that situation...

“A harem protagonist is someone with a skill that enhances their lucky lecher event encounter rate. He gets surrounded by girls who naturally form a harem around him,” I told Sacher, mostly to while away the time. “But since you’re not a Gary Stu or popular, maybe you’re not that much of a protagonist...”

“Huh? Lucky lecher? Gary Stu? What are you talking about?” Sacher asked, getting progressively more confused.

This did, however, help him pull himself back together.

The door opened a while later, and a maid ushered me inside. Lady Rain was apparently finished being wiped off, and she was seated in her chair like nothing had happened. I did the same, and, after entering the room, got right to the topic at hand while pretending I’d seen nothing.

“Lady Rain, are there any developments with the matter of Count Ordile’s son?”

“No, nothing’s changed, it seems.” Lady Rain shook her head, looking troubled, which soon turned into a serious expression, which prompted me to fix my posture.

“I’m starting to think that going to see him ourselves might be the fastest way of going about this,” Lady Rain suggested, aware that we couldn’t leave this matter unattended. “If we go see him ourselves, we’ll have a grasp of what they’re thinking, and more importantly, I won’t have to attend Miss Amanda’s lessons.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. Especially the latter half of it.” I said sincerely, to which Lady Rain nodded. “Let’s prepare to depart, then. It should take us two days to get to the Ordile county by carriage.”

“All right. Let’s also send them a message that we’ll be coming. However, since we’ll be gone for a few days, we can’t take Magiluka and the others with us. We’ll have to leave everyone in the Academy, and it’ll be just you and me,

Mary.”

So it was decided that I’d go on this unplanned trip with Lady Rain. That said, I’ be going with Tutte, along with Lady Rain’s attendants and guards, so we wouldn’t be all alone.

“All right, Sacher, we’ll be counting on you to watch over the Academy in our absence.” I told Sacher, who stood next to us.

“Aww, but your trip sounds like a lot more fun.” Sacher grumbled, crossing his arms behind his head.

It seemed he was back to his usual casual self. Remembering how rattled he was moments ago, I had to place a hand over my mouth to stifle a giggle.

“Wh-What?” he asked brashly, a blush creeping over his cheeks as he clearly sensed what I was thinking.

“...Nothing.”

“Then stop grinning like that, it’s creepy.”

“Creepy?!” I stiffened at his crass remark—the insult was like a stab to the heart. “Oho, so the light novel protagonist wants to hurl insults,” I sidled over to Sacher with an icy smile. Normally, he would run for cover behind the prince once things started looking bad for him, but since the prince now looked like a princess, he felt conflicted about whether it made sense to hide behind a woman.

“H-Huh? Ah, erm... Lady Mary, please, that face is scary...”

“Scary?!” His words once again offended me, so I drew even closer to him, my cold smile wide and unflinching. “Well, you’re just a failure of a light novel protagonist. What you just did lowered my affection points for you, you know.”

“No, listen, I really don’t know what you’re talking about. What’s ‘affection points’? Do you know, Lady Rain?” He finally cracked and turned to Lady Rain for help.

“I don’t know either, but Sacher, you shouldn’t speak like that to a lady.”

“N-Not you too, Lady Rain... Ugh, I don’t really get what I did wrong, but, fine, I’m sorry.” Sacher apologized, realizing his usual ally, the prince, wouldn’t help

him here and he had no one on his side. I grinned victoriously, when...

“...May I say something?” A voice spoke up behind me.

“Phua!” I jumped, making this strange utterance, and turned around. Standing at the open door was Fifi, who had turned up there at some point.

“M-Miss Fifi, what are you doing here? I thought you were sightseeing at the capital.”

“...Well. Lady Elizabeth has a message for you, Lady Mary.”

“A message?” I asked.

“...She told me not to hurry and deliver the message when the time seemed right, but I had no idea when that time would be.”

“R-Really.”

Lady Elizabeth probably meant she could tell me anytime, but Fifi took that too literally.

Still, since it wasn’t delivered by letter, I could only assume it wasn’t too important—or, at least, I wanted to believe it wasn’t a big deal since anything related to Lady Elizabeth probably meant bad news for me.

“...Here is Lady Elizabeth’s message: ‘Be wary of Victorica,’” Fifi said as I listened tensely.

After giving this very brief, succinct message, she bowed to all of us, turned around, and made to leave.

“W-W-Wait, Miss Fifi, hold on! Is that all?”

“...Yes, that’s all. She said if I said that much, you should understand perfectly.”

Well, I don’t! That’s hardly anything to go by! Ugh, but judging by how Fifi’s acting, that’s probably all Lady Elizabeth said...

I wished I could pretend like I hadn’t heard this new keyword, but since Lady Elizabeth gave me this message, it probably meant something had happened on her side. I had to wonder why she felt it was necessary to let me know about something that happened in Relirex, but since all she’d sent was a short verbal

message, it likely wasn't that critical.

Or maybe that was just wishful thinking on my behalf...

Who's Victorica, to begin with? Is that a person's name? I've never heard of any Victorica.

Aaah, God, I'm getting a feeling something really troublesome is about to happen... Please make it just be my overactive imagination...

Fifi watched me with her usual blank stare, tilting her head curiously as I froze up and stood there wordlessly. I could only crack a strained smile at her and look up to the sky in resignation.

11. A Carriage Trip

Despite some anxieties, I ended up agreeing with Lady Rain on a two-day and one-night carriage trip. We gathered at the Academy, and after confirming everything with the group who were staying behind, departed on our way.

Personally, since we were moving within the kingdom, I was hoping for a relatively calm journey with minimal security. With that in mind, I'd sent the count a letter informing him that I, the daughter of Duke Regalia, would be arriving with a friend of mine, Lady Rain. Since he wasn't familiar with the situation, I figured he surely wouldn't imagine the prince would be coming in the form of a princess. Also, honestly, I wanted to avoid creating the impression that the royalty was doing anything conspicuous so that we would minimize any danger on our way there. I certainly wasn't doing it just to keep myself from getting involved in anything troublesome. Honest.

To that end, I tried to keep the people and things around us from looking like they were affiliated with the royal family. However, despite me being nervous about something happening, I was on the verge of nodding off after an hour of riding in the carriage under the pleasant sun shining in from the window.

Tutte and I were seated on one bench, and Lady Rain was on the opposite seat, the sunlight flowing through her golden locks. She gently stroked Lily, who sat curled up on her lap. Lily had her eyes closed blissfully, and she was surrendering herself to Lady Rain's touch.

A golden princess playing with a divine beast... Ah, so picturesque! I ended up staring at them in fascination.

"Aaah, gosh, why did I have to come with you too?" The sound of Snow's grumbling in my ears rained on my moment of euphoria.

Glancing out the window of the carriage, I could see Snow running alongside us and looking toward us. Tutte and Lady Rain stared at her in surprise, and I opened the window to look at Snow.

"I mean, why wouldn't you come along? You have nothing better to do."

“Well, excuse you!”

“There, there. You’re here to guard Lady Rain, plus you’re one of the people who caused this mess. Accept this for what it is and move on,” I said, leaning out the window and whispered at her.

“...All right. I guess when you put it like that, it makes sense.”

Snow seemed convinced by my explanation and moved away from the window. Honestly, I was concerned she might claim she’s too high and mighty of a divine beast to deal with this, so I was frankly relieved that she had a way of being timid at the strangest of times. And, well, if anything bad happened, I had every intent of dumping all the responsibility on her.

I mean, I’ll work if things come down to it, but I’d much rather keep my power hidden if possible, sooo... Snow is perfect that way. If I end up doing something bombastic, I can just say the big impressive divine beast did it!

I shut the window, pleased with my perfect plan, and settled back into my seat with an innocuous expression.

“What were you two talking about?” Lady Rain asked, still stroking Lily.

“Huh? Oh! Hmm, nothing major... Just chatting about how nice and peaceful this trip has been,” I squeaked, coming up with something mundane and inoffensive.

But then, I heard a knock on the carriage door.

“...Lady Mary, would now be a good time to stop and take a break?” I heard one of our guards say.

So as to keep it a secret that Rain was a member of the royal family, I’d had Regalia family knights make up the bulk of our escort detail.

If this were a book or a cartoon, now would be the part where it turned out our guards were actually disguised agents from the kingdom or some evil organization. Aaah, an evil organization... That’s pretty cool...

With that vacant thought going through my mind, I waited for Lady Rain to make a decision. She understood and nodded wordlessly. I gave the guard our consent, and the carriage ground to a halt a few moments later.

Time for a break! Phew, sitting in a carriage for hours does make me stiff...

Tutte stepped out of the carriage and made her preparations, and then I got out first, followed by Lady Rain. We stopped at an open area at a riverside. The river flowed serenely, with sunlight reflecting like gemstones over the water's surface—the epitome of nature's beauty. The water didn't seem very deep either.

I stretched for one long moment, relaxing my stiff limbs. In truth, I wasn't really all that stiff, but being freed from the cramped carriage made me do this unconsciously. As I did, a small, fluffy mass slipped by my legs.

"Oh, Lady Lily!" Tutte called out to the small cub behind me.

I looked down at my side and cast my gaze ahead, spotting Lily bolt toward the stream.

"I suppose Lady Lily must have felt quite bored inside the carriage," Lady Rain said, walking beside me.

She was quite beautiful, and despite her being out of Miss Amanda's clutches, she wasn't using any masculine mannerisms.

"Aha ha ha... Yes, I'd imagine," I said with a dry laugh, glancing at her from the side.

Goodness, are we lucky we got her out of those lessons... If Miss Amanda taught her any more, she'd completely turn into a girl.

"Mm, haah... Let's find ourselves a spot to relax too." Lady Rain suddenly stretched and sighed before following Lily in the direction of the stream. The gesture reminded me of the prince...but what she did next left me aghast.

"Ah, Lady Rain!"

She suddenly took off her shoes and socks, then she pinched up the hems of her skirt so it wouldn't get wet before she dipped her legs in the water. The water was quite shallow, so it only got up to her ankles.

"It's cold! Hee hee, Lady Lily, you want to play too?" Lady Rain squealed from the coolness of the water and looked down at her feet, where Lily was splashing joyfully in the water.

The golden princess playing with the divine beast part 2! Those two look like they're having fun.

I approached the riverside with wobbly steps, lured in by this mystical sight.

"Lady Mary!" Tutte grabbed me by the arm in a hurry.

"Oh, sorry. I have to take off my shoes, right?" I giggled and made to take off my shoes and socks.

"No, Lady Mary, it's just that if you join in on them playing, you'd probably ruin that picturesque sight," my maid said with a straight face.

"Ex*cuse* me?" I turned to Tutte, a vein throbbing on the side of my head, and started poking her on the forehead with my index finger with every syllable.

"Aah, I mean—ow! You would probably do something, ah! That's why." As Tutte tried to get through her excuse, her head bounced back and forth with every poke, and each time she let out a little squeak.



As Lady Mary, daughter of Duke Regalia, I couldn't let this slide. *I'll show her! I can be part of the fun without anything bad happening!* I vigorously took off my shoes and socks, left them with Tutte (who was still teary-eyed and rubbing her forehead), and ran over to play.

"Lady Rain, Lily, don't go too far in, or you might get carried away. Also, don't get your feet caught in the mu—"

Then, right on schedule, my leg got stuck in the mud and I tripped.

I-Is this what they mean when they say you can speak something into existence?! That baseless belief crossed my mind as I tumbled backwards in slow motion.

Having gotten in trouble within split seconds of running out to play, I resigned myself to my fate and just accepted reality. Tutte, who was looking on from behind, likely thought to herself, "That's my Lady Mary. She never fails to disappoint."

Well, excuse me for being a failure of a noble lady!

"Watch out!" A voice called out, and I felt something catch me midfall.

I blinked, then I saw a pair of blue eyes peering at me from behind a curtain of blonde hair. The shining sun was behind my rescuer, but I could still make out her dignified features, which were beautiful enough to make my heart throb despite both of us being girls.

Lady Rain had caught me, and she was peering right into my face.

"Are you all right?" she asked, her tone taking on Reifus's more masculine one, likely owing to the panic with which she'd caught me.

"Y-Yeees..." I squeaked, my heart still racing and my face going red.

With her face right in front of me, my head went into a state of panic, and I could only open and close my mouth for a few seconds, unsure of what to say.

Wait, why am I getting all flustered over a girl?! I mean, d-does Lady Rain count as a girl? He's— I mean, she's a girl right now, but she's a boy on the inside, so maybe it's normal... Aaaagh! I'm confused! God, clear this up!

“Hee hee, when we first met, I caught you like this too. For how talented you are, you can be terribly clumsy at times. But I suppose that’s what makes you who you are, ha ha ha.” Lady Rain smiled, her face quite dignified.

“I’m, uh, sorry to be a bother... Huh?!”

Lady Rain raised her head, but just as I thought her face had moved out of my field of vision, something dived toward my head.

“Lil— Bwah!” I realized what was happening at the last second—Lily had pounced at my face, pressing her fluffy belly against my nose in a bid for attention. Lady Rain and I both lost balance and fell into the river’s water with Lily in a splash.

“...I’d expect no less of you, Lady Mary. You made more of a mess of things than I could ever imagine.”

Tutte walked over to us with towels and a change of clothes, which she’d apparently prepared ahead of time.

“I-It’s not my fault! Lily jumped at my face!” I complained to Tutte, sitting in the water drenched and holding up the divine beast cub.

Lily simply looked at me curiously. Seeing her glittering, pure eyes extinguished any anger I might have had.

“Hee hee, we all got wet. We should dry off,” said Lady Rain, the very image of a good ma—woman. She giggled and reached a hand out to me. “Come, Lady Mary.”

“Erm, uh...” I stammered, my heart still racing from earlier, and hesitated to take her hand.

“I wouldn’t want you to slip into the water again, hee hee,” Lady Rain said teasingly, and I could tell my face was flushing over.

I looked the other way and reached out to grab her hand. But then, the moment I got up, I tensed up in alarm. I turned around and looked toward the forest beyond the sloping hills in the distance.

“What’s wrong?” Lady Rain asked, looking at me with surprise.

“...No. Never mind, it’s nothing,” I said, my eyes still fixed on the forest.

It just felt like someone...or something...was looking at us. If someone was peeking on us, that would be pretty bad timing with how we look right now.

I looked at the woods again, but there wasn't anyone in sight. The only thing of note was a bat flying deeper into the dark woods. I was a bit baffled by seeing a bat in a place like this, but with our clothes so wet, I couldn't exactly go over and look into it. In the end, I went to the river bank with Lady Rain and Lily—carefully, so as not to slip—and returned to Tutte's side.

Our break had ended up lasting longer than expected because of my blunder, but after that, we reached the inn town where we were to spend the night without any trouble.

Incidentally, since Snow was a divine beast, I was worried what might happen when she was seen in town with her large feline frame and all. However, that was resolved soon enough because once we got off the carriage, we were met with someone I hadn't expected to see.

"Welcome, Lady Mary... Oh, and this must be your friend, Lady Rain. And the venerable divine beast." A woman greeted us with a ladylike curtsy—it was none other than Instructor Alice. It wasn't unnatural that she'd be here since this inn town was part of Ordile county, and because I'd sent the count a letter ahead of our arrival, it made sense that she'd heard we were coming.

Still, I knew her as a freak—ahem, as an instructor who only cared for the undead, so seeing her come out to greet us was quite unusual. It was very unusual! It's important, so I said it twice.

She could have waited at the Ordile domain's capital, but instead she trekked all the way out here to this town to meet us. Why would she do that? The timing's too good too. It's like she knew we would be here.

While a bit cautious, we followed Instructor Alice and entered the inn town without much incident. She then took us to the count's mansion, which was a short ways off from the town. The reason it was so isolated from the rest of the town soon became evident.

"W-Wow, this place..."

The mansion before us was extremely old-fashioned, and it looked like

something out of a horror movie. Indeed, if such a hair-raising mansion had been standing in the middle of an inn town, it would have driven all the tourists away.

If the place was simply unmaintained and decrepit it would be one thing, but it was clear the place's exaggerated appearance was intentional, giving the mansion a man-made atmosphere. As for the woman who led us here...

"Aaah... ♪" She looked at the building with ecstatic eyes. "Father's estate is as lovely as ever. Why won't the people in town acknowledge this place's beauty?"

I see she's still as much of a freak as ever. I think it's pretty clear why they don't acknowledge it...

To make things worse, there was an old, run-down public cemetery next to the house. I could only hope it wasn't real but rather a replica meant to heighten the mood.

Seriously, please...

"Hmm... Lady Mary, are we going in there?" Tutte asked, staring at the estate with a pale expression.

Oh, right, Tutte's bad with this sort of thing.

"W-W-We can't sleep here! I-I'll just stay outside!" Snow was trembling and looked primed to run.

Really, you too? I thought to myself as I grabbed her hard by the tail.

"You're a divine beast, for crying out loud. Why are you scared of a spooky mansion? Come on, let's go."

"Nooo, let me goooo!" Snow's cries for help echoed in my head as I dragged her along.

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"Phew, I'm tired..."

Once we entered the mansion, I was taken to my private room and immediately dived into the bed. Despite how it looked on the outside, the

interior was well maintained and clean, so once we went inside, the place looked like a normal mansion.

I guess the decorations in the corridor were pretty horror-themed though. Who'd decorate their house with skeleton engravings?

"Lady Mary, are you resting?" Tutte asked as she put down my luggage next to me.

Since the mansion looked normal on the inside, she was able to work normally. Well, except for the fact that she refused to leave my side.

There was another person—well, not a person, a cat—in the room. Snow, whom I'd dragged inside, refused to leave my side too. I still had no idea what she was so terrified of, considering she was a powerful divine beast. Lily, by comparison, looked around curiously and was completely unperturbed.

"Yeah... I think I'll take a little rest."

After the mess during our break at the river bank and how much trouble I'd caused Lady Rain, I wanted a chance to regain my dignity. To that end, since Instructor Alice had shown up to greet us, I decided to take a rest and hear what she had to say.

There's a lot to do, and since Magiluka and the others aren't here, I have to make sure I don't...mess this up...

I closed my eyes to plan what I'll be doing next, but without realizing it, I soon nodded off...

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"...Whoa! Did I really fall asleep?!"

My eyes flew open, and I hopped out of bed. The room was much darker than it'd been when we'd arrived, and a beautiful full moon was visible from the window.

I can't believe I just slept through the day! How long was I out?!

I'd been so resolved to do everything right this time, and all I could do was facepalm at how I'd slipped up.

“Oh, you’re up, Lady Mary?” Tutte approached, using a lamp’s light to navigate through the gloom.

She had likely dimmed the lights as much as possible to help me sleep peacefully. I was thankful for the consideration, but also disappointed. According to Tutte, while I was asleep, dinner and other such events had come and gone, and Lady Rain had handled all of those matters.

To cover for me, Lady Rain had said I was tired, using the tried and true “She’s frail” excuse, so I was allowed to sleep in. From an outsider’s perspective, I should have been the main attraction of this visit, but I’d ended up fading out and making my friend step in and kindly take over the situation—in other words, I’d made yet another blunder.

Whenever I’m about to screw up big time, Magiluka always steps in to handle things... I once again realized how important she was when it came to me getting by.

While I was feeling discouraged, my stomach didn’t seem to much care for my emotional turmoil and grumbled hungrily. I put a hand on my belly, going red.

“We asked the main cook to make you dinner, so I’ll go heat it up now.” My capable maid smiled and left the room, lantern in hand.

I got out of bed and followed her.

“I can’t let others do my work for me any further. I’ll go to the kitchen too.”

Tutte and I walked through the mildly creepy corridors of the mansion together. They were just barely lit by moonlight, and the silence was quite eerie. The inn town would normally be quite bustling at nighttime, but for some reason, it was terribly quiet around this estate—not that I couldn’t understand why no one wanted to come anywhere near this place.

“...So, I know why Tutte’s sticking to me like glue, but what’s your excuse, Snow?”

As I walked through the halls, Tutte was pinching the hem of my sleeve while following behind me, and on my other side was Snow, who was looking around skittishly. Honestly, having Snow’s large frame clinging to me made it difficult to walk through the hall.

“I-I-I-I’m not going to stay alone in that room! It’s scary! What if a ghost came out?!”

“Why would a divine beast be afraid of ghosts? Right, Lily? Your big sister’s being pathetic!” I said, looking down at Lily, who was cradled in my hands.

She looked up at me, responding to her name being called. There was no fear in her eyes.

“Well, you say that, but the only reason you’re so brave is because you have Lily in your arms!”

“Th-Th-That’s not true... I think...” I said, my eyes darting away as I held Lily tight.

And then I saw it—a white figure taking a turn in the corridor...

“A gho...” I nearly squealed.

“Ghoooost!”

“Hey, stop screaming in my head!” I snapped at Snow, coming back to my senses.

Snow had pressed against us, with Tutte and I both having our faces half-buried in her fluffy fur.

“You protected us, Lady Snow! Thank you!” Tutte thanked the cowardly creature, misunderstanding the situation. “By the way, Lady Mary, you should probably let go of Miss Lily now.” Tutte’s wrong impression had left her calm enough to point this out. It took me a second to understand what she was saying and look down at my arms. Lily was locked in my grasp and pressed against my body, looking like she could fall over at any second. Apparently, I’d tensed up in fear and accidentally hugged her too forcefully. I hurriedly loosened my hold on her.

“S-Sorry, Lily! Ah...”

The moment I loosened my grip on her, Lily squirmed out of my hands and raced off in the direction of the white shadow. I was completely in the wrong, so I couldn’t blame her. Instead, I slowly and carefully turned the corner and checked what was past it.

“Lily... I’m sorry. Please come back...” I said, peeking over the corner.

I could see the white shadow from earlier, but since I was ready for it this time, it came as much less of a surprise, and I was able to easily recognize it.

Is that...Instructor Alice? What’s she doing in the middle of the night?

She was holding a lantern in one hand and some package in the other, and she had a robe on, like she was about to go outside.

Good timing. I was just wanting to talk to her.

I decided to follow her with the intention of calling out to her. Shouting in the middle of the night would have been a bother to everyone else, though, so I kept quiet until I approached her. But Instructor Alice moved with swift steps, and I couldn’t quite close the distance with her...or rather, I couldn’t walk too fast with one stupid divine beast still clinging on my back. Lily, by the way, had been picked up by Tutte, and she sat snugly in her arms.

Since I couldn’t catch up to Instructor Alice, I ended up following her until she left out the back door.

Going outside at this time of night? What for?

I’d only gone out to get something to eat, but having run into something unusual, we decided to keep following her. Tutte picked up on my inventions and, with Lilystill in her arms, assertively opened the door and stepped outside ahead of me.

That’s my maid for you—making sure I don’t break the door by accident.

Just as I was about to cross the door, I heard a loud thud.

“Ow!” Snow’s voice echoed in my head.

Since she was still clinging to me, she bumped her head on the wall above the back door.

“What are you doing? And could you stop sticking to me like that? Come on, we’re supposed to follow Instructor Al—”

I’d turned to look in the direction Instructor Alice had walked off in, but then I realized she was headed toward the public cemetery built next to the manor,

which looked several times more creepy during nighttime. The two of us fell silent for a moment.

“Oh, erm, I guess I can’t pass through this door. It’s just too small...and you told me to back off, so I’ll just wait he—” Snow retreated back through the door, despite being perfectly capable of creeping through it.

I grabbed her by the head to stop her from fleeing.

“Well, I take back what I said. I’m sorry, please don’t stop sticking to me. We’re friends, Snow, so we should always stay together...” I said as I made her face forward and flashed her a gentle smile.

“Mary...”

For one moment, Snow and I stared at each other. *Oh, friendship is so beautiful...*

“You won’t fool me! Nooo! God, help meeee! There’s a devil here saying she’s my friend so she can drag me down with heeeer!”

“Who are you calling a devil?! That’s rude! Just come out alreaaaady!”

The beautiful, glittering moment shattered, giving way to a merciless scene where I was dragging Snow along, intent on taking her down with me if this excursion somehow turned out disastrous.

12. There’s No Changing Fate

“Aw, because you kept dawdling, we lost sight of Instructor Alice!” I chided Snow, who was sniffing the ground ahead of us.

“That’s why I’m looking for her now, all right?! And back off a little. You’re too close.”

Snow looked up and ahead. I followed her gaze, and indeed, she was looking in the direction of the cemetery. We could have just waited in the manor until Instructor Alice came back, but since I knew who we were dealing with, I had a feeling she was up to no good. And if she was, I felt like we needed to stop her.

Moments later, we entered the (hopefully) fake public cemetery. The place

had a layer of fog hanging over it, and it looked quite creepy.

“Whoa, this is just like the kind of cemeteries you’d see in a zombie flick...” I murmured to myself. Many of the movies I’d seen were in places that looked just like this, which helped curb any fear I might have felt.

At the center of the graveyard, I found the person we were looking for.

“Oh, there’s Instructor Alice!”

Her back was turned to us, and she was so concentrated on something she apparently didn’t notice us. She was doing something silently... Actually, scratch that, she was laughing eerily as she went about her business.

“Heh heh heh! Finally! I finally get to test my research! With the item they gave me, I can rouse the zombies sleeping in this cemetery from their eternal sleep! Ah, my zombie harem is upon me!” She said manically, cackling as she held a crystal ball up to the night sky.

Okay, no. This isn’t a fake cemetery, it’s very real!

“Go, Snow! Headbutt her!” I instructed Snow, tapping into my inner beast tamer.



“Roger! Wait, are you sure we’re allowed to do this?” Snow nearly bolted forward reflexively, but she paused, walked back, and questioned my suggestion.

“Don’t worry! We have to go that far if we’re going to stop that freak—I mean, instructor.”

“...You call her *an instructor? Fine, here I go.”*

Snow seemed to take my rather rude remark at face value and sprinted at Instructor Alice, who was still laughing maniacally, and tackled her from behind.

“Aha ha ha! Finally! Finally my dream is— Bwufha!”

Instructor Alice went flying in an arc.

Seriously, what is she doing?

As Instructor Alice lay on the ground twitching for a few seconds, I approached her with a sigh.

“What are you doing out at this time of night, Instructor Alice?” I asked casually.

“Mary, did you see how far I pushed her? She’s not going to be answering any questions for a while,” Snow said with concern in her voice, standing between me and her.

“L-Lady Mary!” Instructor Alice instantly sat up like nothing had happened. “Nooo! why?!”

“Seriously?!” Snow looked aghast.

“How did you...?” Instructor Alice looked at me in surprise and started mumbling to herself. “I posted guards to make sure you wouldn’t see this, and I checked in with them, so how? Don’t tell me you noticed the guards... But how long have you...? Don’t tell me you noticed as far back as when you were by the river... So that’s why you pretended to sleep as soon as you showed up... If you were too active, I’d have remained too wary of you... But you all stayed in one place, lulling me into thinking it’d be easier to keep a watch on all of you... Heh heh heh, and I fell for it. That’s how you exposed me, Lady Mary!”

Instructor Alice came up with some deranged explanation for all this while fixing her cracked silver-rimmed glasses.

Why does this keep happening? It even happened in Relirex. I denied everything, but everyone kept making mistaken assumptions about me anyway. Here I am facing the exact same fate again...

Instructor Alice seemed satisfied with her own made-up explanation, and I was at a loss for how to respond.

But wait, what if I just go along with the story this time? Won't that make it seem all the more sketchy and stop any crazy misunderstandings from cropping up? God, play along with me here! I'm going to change fate!

I instantly moved into action. With an indomitable smile on my lips, I looked at Instructor Alice with confident eyes.

"Heh, heh, heh. That's right!"

Everyone present stared at me, meeting my confident statement with befuddled silence.

"...Indeed, you're as fearsome as I thought, Lady Mary. I couldn't outsmart you." Instructor Alice shuddered in the face of my smug claim.

God! I couldn't change fate!

While I didn't let my smug expression crumble, I was screaming on the inside.

Okay, calm down. You confirmed her suspicions, and she just believed you. I don't know what you were expecting a few seconds ago. I guess that was just youthful indiscretion, so can we make it so that didn't count?

I knew I was asking for the impossible. Looking around, I saw Instructor Alice was alarmed and just took my words at face value. It was too late. I couldn't read Snow's expression since she was a leopard, but Tutte looked convinced and impressed. Snow probably thought the same, so I just gave up and went along with it.

"Anyway... Who put you up to this? Was it Count Ordile, or your brother? Using zombies to put Lady Rain in danger is unacceptable!" I said.

"H-Huh? What's this about my father and brother? Huh? What's wrong with

using zombies?” Instructor Alice replied with a rather unhinged question, but looking at her reaction, it really didn’t seem like Count Ordile had told her to do this.

“Why would you want to release zombies on the townsfolk?” I said slowly, glaring at her.

“Because it would be lovely!” Instructor Alice said, her eyes glowing like a girl dreaming of fairy tales.

I stared at her in silence.

“Mary... About this girl. Is it just me, or is she...?” Snow retreated from Instructor Alice, looking appalled.

“Don’t say it. I have enough of a headache as it is.”

Congratulations, Instructor Alice. You creeped out a divine beast.

“I only wanted to greet you with the warmest welcome possible! I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then why were you trying so hard to hide your actions? Why be so wary of me? I mean, you say you’re not doing anything wrong.”

“No, it’s just... I wanted to make it a surprise.” Instructor Alice cocked her head, sticking out her tongue.

“Snow, go! Use body slam!”

“Roger!”

Snow tackled Instructor Alice to punish her for her bothersome ways, sending her flying away.

“I swear... You cause trouble for everyone then try to pass it off as good intentions. Well, at least we nipped this disaster in the bud.” I said, looking at my pitiful instructor twitching on the ground.

“My word.” I suddenly heard an unfamiliar man’s voice. “If I knew this would end so quickly, I wouldn’t have bothered to get her to do this...”

I looked around tensely and saw a large number of bats gather on the small trees of the woods surrounding the cemetery. I realized, with a start, that I was

sensing the same presence I'd felt near the river.

"What's with all these bats?" I asked cautiously.

"Mary, look up!"

Snow's words prompted me to turn my head skyward. Basking in the glow of the beautiful full moon was a man floating in midair. He had long black hair done up neatly, and he wore a black velvet butler's outfit. His features were so perfectly sculpted as to be disturbing, his skin was unnaturally pale, and his hair was pure white. He looked to be in his mid twenties, but somehow I got the feeling that couldn't be true—after all, I quickly noticed he wasn't human. What gave him away was his eyes. His eyeballs didn't have a trace of white to them; instead, they were wholly black, save for his irises, which glinted ruby red. It was evident these weren't the eyes of a human.

Is this a demon? But he doesn't have horns like Emilia does. And I get the feeling I've seen monsters that look and dress just like him in games and anime. I think he must be...

"...a vampire," I whispered.

Hearing this, the man's eyes widened in momentary surprise, but he soon regained his neutral expression and bowed respectfully.

"My, my. I listened in on your earlier exchange, but even with all that in mind, I am impressed, Lady Mary. The fact you could expose my identity with a single glance... You're more fearsome than I've heard."

Stop iiiiit! Don't tell me he's getting the wrong idea too! I was just hazarding a guess!

As I cringed internally while trying to maintain a facade of caution, the man landed elegantly.

"My apologies for not introducing myself." He bowed again. "I am Orbus, butler for House Bloodrain. But I'm sure you already knew that, Lady Mary—nay, the Argent Holy Woman, as you are called."

Hearing him mention this embarrassing detail from my past made me cringe even harder.

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Heh heh, feigning ignorance now? That’s quite ill-natured of you.” Orbus flashed a knowing smile, likely not taking my words seriously.

Gaaah, there’s no changing fate, is there? You’ve got the wrong idea! Everyone keeps getting the wrong idea! Please, stop making a big deal about me!

As I freaked out on the inside, Orbus bowed again with a collected expression and assumed a fighting pose in a very pretentious sort of way. Seeing this made me take things seriously.

“Now then, would you spare some time and play with me, Argent Holy Woman?” the handsome butler said. “Let us go about this fair and square, as nobles d—”

“How about no? Turn Undead!” I said aggressively before he could finish his sentence, chanting a divine magic spell.

“Huh? You can chant a spell this fa— Aaaagh?!” Orbus started speaking in surprise, but when the light surged up from under his feet, he let out a howl.

When the light died down, Orbus wasn’t fully purified, but rather he was kneeling on the ground and gasping for air. As I suspected, a vampire was the highest grade of undead... Or at least I assumed as much since I had no idea how things worked in this world.

“Haah, haah... Heh heh, going straight for divine magic, are you? As one would expect of the Argent Holy W—”

“Turn Undead!”

“Y-You can cast it repeat— Agaggghaaa?!”

I repeatedly cast my divine magic spell on Orbus, cutting him off before he could say anything I didn’t like hearing. His screams of pain echoed through the cemetery—it was honestly a waste of his good looks. When the light died down, he was kneeling and breathing in pain again.

“Haah, haah... Such low order magic won’t defeat me, Argent H—”

“Turn Undead!”

“When are you going to run out of m— Aaaaaaaaagh!” Orbus screamed as he was enveloped in light again.

I couldn’t defeat him with this spell, but given how hard he was screaming, it did seem to be dealing damage, so I continually unleashed the divine magic on him.

“Haah, haah... To be able to use magic so many times in a row despite being merely human. I can see why they call you the Arge—”

“Turn Undead!”

“Are you serious— Ghaaaaaaaaa?!”

After being enveloped by light multiple times, his screaming was turning into whimpering. It seemed he was gradually becoming seriously injured.

“...Umm, Mary, stop. Stop. He’s already...un...dead. I feel bad for him,” Snow said, sympathizing with Orbus—in spite of him being the bad guy here—because of how one-sided this was.

Realizing I was effectively silencing him whenever he mentioned a certain embarrassing epithet, I started regretting how I was handling the situation. I looked around—Instructor Alice was still twitching on the ground, and Orbus looked gravely injured.

“Okay, Snow, um, you handle this! I’ll go report to Lady Rain!” I said, then I instantly turned right and bolted away, leaving everything in Snow’s paws.

“Huh?! What, wait, get back heeeere!”

I picked up Tutte, who had been watching me from afar with Lily in her arms, and ran off, no questions asked. After all, I needed to leave before those two came back to their senses and things became annoyi— I mean, I needed to go call for help. I *had* to run, you see.

“I said wait for meeeeee!”

“Snow, you can’t come with us! You have to watch those two!” I glanced back at Snow, who was chasing me.

“Don’t dump your dirty work on me!” Snow replied, accurately reading my intentions.

Tch. Why does she have to have good intuition at times like this?

"Lady Mary, look ahead! There's some ruckus in the mansion!" Tutte said, cradled in my arms.

My first assumption was that the people in the mansion had heard the commotion outside and were coming out to help, but apparently, I was wrong. They weren't looking at me, but rather at the sky.

What is this...? My heart's beating fast!

I tried to calm my racing heart and made way into the thick of the commotion.

13. Oh No, Lady Rain...

I sprinted through the small forest between the mansion and the cemetery, put Tutte down, and looked up. Under the beautiful starry sky was a girl wearing a pretty dress who looked to be about my age. Her lovely black hair trailed in the breeze, and the underlayer beneath her obsidian locks was platinum blonde. Her bangs were well cut, with a few snowy locks interspersed among the otherwise sable tufts adorning her forehead.

She had pale white skin like Orbus, but what set her apart the most from him was her eyes. Her eyes were white, like a human's, and her irises were a beautiful shade of blue. On closer inspection, however, I noticed one of her eyes was covered by an eyepatch embroidered with a complex symbol. This made me instantly assume she was some kind of cringey, wannabe teen, which made it slightly harder to appreciate the fact she was otherwise very pretty.

I decided not to think about it too much. Then, when I realized who she was carrying in her arms, I shuddered with a start.

"Lady Raiiiin!"

Yes, sitting in the eyepatch girl's arms, with her eyes closed like she was asleep, was Lady Rain.

"Wh-What...?" the girl muttered to herself. "Why are they back so soon...? What are those two doing?"

The eyepatch girl noticed me, and I could hear her whispering under her breath. She soon got over her confusion and flashed an indomitable smile at me. "Keh, keh, keh! Well, no matter! This chance meeting must be the inescapable fate of this world. Yes, let the curtain rise on the dark story of our bloody feud! There's no need for surprises. This is destiny, after all!"

"Erm..." I wasn't sure how to react to the eyepatch girl's annoying—erm, bombastic manner of speaking.

"I know not how you realized Orbus was but a diversion, but you returned here sooner than anticipated. I'd expect no less of the Argent Holy Woman, the

mortal enemy the heavens have set against me. You are a worthy opponent!”

Oh, great, another person who has all the wrong ideas about me... You know what? I’m not even going to bother answering anymore. They’ll take anything I say and twist it into something else anyway.

Knowing that no answer would change my fate here, I turned to holding my tongue as my last resort and simply gazed at the eyepatch girl.

“Keh, keh, keh. Silent, are you? Truly, you are a tactician. You refuse to let my poetic rhetoric trick you into divulging any information, I see. But very well! I relish the challenge of breaking down your firm defenses!”

She somehow managed to take even my silence the wrong way.

God, did you send me to a world of weirdos who make up the craziest explanations for everything?

I wanted nothing but to fall to the ground on my hands and knees and despair over this odd course of events, but I restrained myself and looked up at the eyepatch girl. Given the situation, I certainly didn’t have the time for that. If this girl was like Orbus, a human who aligned with the demons, this could be an international incident.

“Who are you?!” I demanded.

“Oh? And I thought you already knew... Aah, you’re giving me a chance to introduce myself, are you? Keh, keh, keh, quite confident of you. Very well. Listen carefully then, Argent Holy Woman!”

Gaaah, would you stop calling me that?! This is embarrassing...!

While she still held Lady Rain in her arms, the eyepatch girl cackled—blind to how much her words were tormenting me—straightened her back, and declared, “My name is Victorica, the oldest and strongest of all vampires! Know and fear me, the head of the illustrious House Bloodrain!”

Victorica looked down on me and proudly declared her name.

I can’t help but feel like this eyepatch girl is one of those edgy fictional character wannabes from my past life. I guess that’s on me since my brain’s too poisoned by anime and comics.

Still, Victorica, huh...? I feel like I've heard that name somewhere. Must be a cringey edgelord from some show or another.

I was fixated on trying to remember where I'd heard that name before, cocking my head as I dug through my memories and not paying attention to Victorica after she'd gone to all the trouble of introducing herself. Given I'd asked her to tell me her name, the fact I just stood there and said nothing was quite rude.

"Grr..." Victorica gritted her teeth in the face of my silence. "I did as you asked and gave my name!"

"Oh!" I finally remembered, seeing her reaction but too occupied to acknowledge it. "Lady Elizabeth's message mentioned a Victorica."

"Grrrrr...!" Victorica gritted her teeth even harder for some reason. "Lady Elizabeth's message?!"

Yeah, I heard the name when Lady Elizabeth told me to "beware of Victorica." That answers that question. But I guess knowing that doesn't really improve this situation, does it?

"Ha, so this is your plan, too! Gaaaah, you shame me not once, but twice! Unforgivable!" Victorica stomped her feet in midair.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, realizing I'd angered her. "I was just lost in thought... But wait, twice? I just met you today."

"Keh, keh, keh!" Victorica suddenly went from anger to puffing up her chest proudly. "Maybe you thought angering me would make me lose my composure, but that won't work. Do not underestimate me, Argent Holy Woman, for I am Victorica Bloodrain, oldest and strongest of all vampires!"

Seeing her like this made me notice something.

"Um, excuse me. May I say something?" I asked.

"You may not! You will try to use your silver tongue to deceive me, won't you? I'm afraid that won't work! House Bloodrain's many years of wisdom slumber within me, and it allows me to see through your petty tricker—"

"Maybe we should wake that wisdom up, then. It's not doing you any good

when it's asleep," I mumbled to myself, half-exasperated. And I did have something important, if uncomfortable, to say. "Umm, you probably can't tell since you're carrying Lady Rain, but... Um, you do realize we're looking up at you from below, and the wind's flapping your skirt a lot, right? We can kind of see everything. Are you all right with that?"

"Waaaah!" Victorica went very red in the face. "I-I'm not all right with tha—Whoa, I almost dropped her...!"

She tried to push down her skirt, but then she hurriedly had to tighten her hold on Lady Rain again. Incidentally, what was under her skirt was black and lacy. *A girl with a cute face wearing lingerie like that? Be still, my heart.*

"Whoa, that was dangerous! What if you dropped her?! Come on, get down here. I'll take Lady Rain, and we can talk on the ground. That way no one will be able to see up your skirt. It'd be for the best, right?"

"Ah, hmm. Yes, that's right, thank you..." Victorica nodded and made to descend, but then she realized what she was doing and soared back up. "Wait, no! You shan't fool me!"

Uh, how do I put it...? She doesn't seem like a bad girl... Did I do something to get her to hold a grudge?

I tried thinking back on it, but I didn't remember ever meeting such a weird—I mean, cute girl before. Plus, I was pretty sure I'd remember meeting a vampire. As far as I could remember, tonight was my first time meeting vampires, so this was truly a mystery.

"Keh, keh keh... Anyway, I will be taking this golden princess you're so desperate to protect. Let this crushing defeat break your spirit! May your heart be enveloped in darkness as you weep bitter tears!"

While I was busy trying to figure out if I'd met her or not, Victorica declared her intentions with a high-pitched laugh. Her avowal seemed to beckon a large number of bats from the forest, which stood between us like a wall.

"Ah, hey, wait!" I called out.

"Mary, behind you!" I heard Snow call for me to stop. *"There's trouble coming your way!"*

I turned around and saw a group of several zombie dogs running toward us.

“Whoa, Instructor Alice... You came to after taking all that damage? I guess you’re getting tougher.”

Said Instructor was chasing the zombie dogs, her eyes glittering lovingly as she cooed, “Aaaah, wait for meee! I want to snuggle you more!”

Huh... Are the zombies just running away from her?

The thought occurred to me that maybe the dogs had just instinctively realized, “Oh, this woman’s bad news! Let’s skedaddle!” They certainly seemed stressed out.

“Keh, keh, keh... Perfect timing. Have fun playing with those zombies, Argent Holy Woman. A good day to you!” Victorica said when my back was turned to her, and she flew off, her voice growing quieter with distance.

“Ah, wait! Leave Lady Rain here!” I turned around and shouted after her, but a cloud of bats covered my field of vision. “Do you have any idea who you’re kidnapping?!”

When the bats cleared, I couldn’t see either of the two girls.

Oh no, oh no, this is really bad! What do I do? What am I going to do? What am I supposed to do?!

As I was panicking, Snow’s voice echoed in my head again.

“Mary, the zombies are coming!”

Normally, I’d have Magiluka here to think quickly on her feet, but she wasn’t here now. Unsure of what to do, I decided to focus on the threat before my eyes and began chanting spells on the zombie dogs. If this were an anime, my eyes would no doubt have been a confused swirl right now.

“R-Reduce everything to ashes, Vermillion B—” In my confusion, I started chanting a fifth-order spell.

“Wait, wait, stop! Are you trying to turn this whole place into an inferno?!”

Snow, the only one here to understand what I was trying to do, smacked me over the face with a paw to stop me from chanting. In my confusion, I’d nearly

unleashed a magical catastrophe on the area, but she thankfully stopped me.

14. Onward, to Castle Bloodrain! Part 1

The chaos in the mansion soon died down, but it took us a while to prepare for our urgent departure, and we didn't leave until after the sun rose. I was riding on Snow's back as she strode through the sky. Sitting behind me was Tutte, who was carrying my things, and Lily, who was playing with her.

We were heading for the Ordile County capital, but I wasn't seeking to meet the count. The capital was only a waypoint along the way. Before leaving, I sent a messenger on a fast horse to inform the count of the events that had transpired.

"Erm, Lady Mary, is it just me, or am I being subjected to cruel and unusual treatment here?" I heard a voice from under Snow's legs.

There was a rope tied to Snow's neck, from which Instructor Alice dangled, tied up like a caterpillar in a cocoon. After Victorica had left, Orbus had disappeared as well, and the only one left there was Instructor Alice.

She'd been left behind because her role was only to summon zombies, and she cared for nothing else...or so she insisted. Not that I cared.

"Well, you being up to no good was what landed us in this mess. Reflect long and hard about what you did," I answered.

She hung her head tiredly and went quiet. I was taking her along with us because I needed her to show us the way to Victorica's hiding place. Along the way, she told me more about who we were facing. Apparently, for generations, the Ordile family had had an additional duty alongside managing their domain —maintaining a relationship with House Bloodrain.

The Bloodrain family was a clan of vampires who, for many years, lived far from the domain's capital in a castle built in an inaccessible, precipitous gorge. The Bloodrains, as well as their stronghold, traced their history to long before the founding of Aldia, and for generations, it was the duty of House Ordile to survey the vampires and function as Aldia's bulwark against the threat they posed.

As time went by, there was the occasional clash, but relations between OrdileCounty and House Bloodrain had remained amicable since the Argent Knight beat up the Dark Lord and created the kingdom alliance. Ever since, the vampires of House Bloodrain, in accordance with the Relirex Kingdom, have lived peacefully and maintained friendly relations with the County.

I doubt it's the case, but maybe Instructor Alice and her grandfather developed their undead fetish because of contact with the Bloodrain family.

Digressions aside, it was evidently this house of vampires who had been docile for centuries who'd suddenly decided to kidnap Lady Rain—vampires whose existence was, thanks to the extended period of peace the Kingdom of Aldia has been enjoying, largely considered to be a rumor or a fairytale by anyone unrelated to the Ordile domain.

On top of all that history, two years ago, the current head of the family, Victorica, had said "I'll be going to sleep for a while" before disappearing into her castle, only to wake up recently. According to Instructor Alice, when the vampires of House Bloodrain go to sleep, it's typically for very long periods of time, so her waking up so soon was curious.

But perhaps the most salient piece of information Alice had to offer was this: apparently, Mr. Perfect Man, aka John Ordile, had been taken into Victorica's castle. The first letter we'd sent had made him panic, and when Victorica had courteously dropped by to announce she'd woken up, he'd courteously asked for her advice in turn, so she took him home with her. Since Instructor Alice had followed Victorica around, staring at her in fascination the whole time she was there, I was inclined to take her testimony seriously.

The weirdest part was that when my name, Mary Regalia, had been mentioned, Victorica's mood had apparently taken a sudden turn for the worse. When she'd learned it was I who was asking to meet John, she'd smirked and snatched him away without another word.

Huh. Did I do something to offend her after all?

Unfortunately, Instructor Alice was too fascinated with Victorica to fully listen to what she'd said, so Instructor Alice had only told the count half the story. He'd only known I'd wanted to visit John without knowing why, and he'd

assumed his son was in trouble. He'd urgently tried to solve the situation on his own, and he'd been stalling for time with his replies.

So, what had led Alice to come to the inn town and greet us? It was simple: she hadn't been here on the Count's orders, but rather, on Victorica's.

Listening to Victorica, who's caused all this trouble, over your father... I guess that tracks. Instructor Alice does *put the undead first...*

"And where did you get that crystal ball you had?" I asked.

"Lady Victorica gave it to me," Instructor Alice replied, still dangling beneath me. "There's a large treasure vault in her castle that houses many such items and reagents."

In spite of being in the midst of a punishment, Instructor Alice was taking being dangled around like this in stride. *I wish I could keep my spirits up like she can...*

"So, Victorica is a collector? Or, don't tell me, she's a magus smith?"

"No. She cares little for the items themselves, and I doubt she has any expert knowledge about them. As she once put it to me while she was staring at a slip of paper, she's merely 'providing them a place to stay.'"

I raised my eyebrow, confused. What Instructor Alice had just said felt very off.

"Mary! The capital's in sight!" Snow pulled me out of my thoughts, and I looked ahead.

"So, that's the Ordile domain's capital. Instructor Alice, which way to Victorica's castle?"

"Over there. It's in a gorge within those mountain. I've only gone there once, but I'll never forget that castle! It's like a wonderland of lovely dreams! Hee hee hee, oh, I can't believe I get to go there again! Hee hee hee!"

I stared at Instructor Alice—who was giggling grossly beneath us—and decided to just ignore her. I fixed my gaze on the mountains she'd pointed out.

"Wait for us, Lady Rain. We'll save you for sure." I roused myself.

“You’re like a fairytale prince setting out to save the princess, Lady Mary,” Tutte remarked casually behind me.

I mean...we’re both girls, so this isn’t like a knightly romance, right? Ah, but she’s a boy on the inside, so maybe it actually works, somehow? No, it’s all backwards—it’d only work if she were the one rescuing me. Actually, how much like a knightly romance would this situation be either way?

Tutte’s remark left me feeling rather restless and fidgety as I tried to figure the situation out.

***

While Mary was making her way to Victorica’s castle, things were happening on the other side of the story. Reifus’s eyes cracked open as the effect of the spell he was under wore off.

“Where am I...?”

Realizing he didn’t recognize the ceiling before him, Reifus instantly knew something was wrong and sat up. He calmed himself down and tried to remember what had occurred.

“Right, I was about to go check on Miss Mary when I heard someone call for me from the window...” Once Reifus recalled that, he immediately came to the conclusion he’d been kidnapped. “That was careless of me. I didn’t expect anyone would come after me now that I’ve turned into a woman...”

Few people knew what had happened, and he didn’t think it’d been long enough for the news to spread across the kingdom, so the possibility of someone targeting him was something he hadn’t considered. Reifus could only bitterly regret his lack of caution.

Thinking back, the person who abducted him was a girl in a fancy dress and an eyepatch. It occurred to him that it wasn’t likely a spy would wear something that showy and distinctive. What’s more, she’d referred to Reifus as “Rain,” which came across as quite off to him.

Maybe he’d been abducted for some reason, but since he was unable to come up with one, Reifus simply cracked a tired smile.

“So...what do I do now, then?”

Should he act to escape on his own or not? The moment he had that thought, a certain silver-haired girl flashed in his mind. No doubt she would hurry to his aid. Reifus shook his head, denying the idea.

“No, I shouldn’t be so quick to rely on her. I should act to free myself.”

At worst, he wanted to avoid a situation where he ended up hampering Mary’s attempts to save him. Having come to this decision, Reifus began working toward figuring out where he was. He looked out the window first. The sky was covered in thick clouds that blocked off all light, and fog hung over the area, obscuring his vision. The building’s exterior seemed to be made of stone, reminiscent of Reifus’s own castle.

“Is this a castle? And I can just barely make out mountains in the distance. What kind of castle is this?”

But then there was a knock on the door, and Reifus stiffened in alarm. Since the person who knocked on the door didn’t just walk in, they must have been aware of etiquette.

“Come in.” Reifus carefully gave them permission.

“Pardon me, lovely princess.”

The door opened, and a man walked in. He looked to be young, in his twenties, and he was dressed like a noble. Reifus kept a careful distance from him, however. Perhaps interpreting Reifus’s caution for fear, the man bowed reverently and flashed him a smile.

A young, handsome man smiling sweetly—many a girl would perhaps have been charmed by it, but since Reifus was a man on the inside, it did nothing to him.

“Pardon me for not introducing myself yet. I am John Ordile, lovely princess.”

His name gave Reifus a start. He didn’t expect to meet the very person they were looking for here. At the same time, the revelation made Reifus even more suspicious. Perhaps sending John a letter saying they wanted to ask about the diary and the circlet was what had gotten Reifus abducted... He couldn’t

discredit that possibility, so John's current attitude confused him all the more.

Since Mary and Reifus had lacked any positive proof, they hadn't included any details about the incident in their correspondence, so John wouldn't have been able to know that the girl he was seeing now was actually the prince, and for all John should have known, he was speaking to a friend of Mary's. He'd also kept calling him a "lovely princess," which gave the impression John was treating Reifus as a girl.

Unable to get a handle on the situation, Reifus decided that revealing his identity right now would be hasty, so he decided to stick to the act for the time being. It was at this moment that he honestly thought to himself that taking Miss Amanda's lessons had been a boon.

"A pleasure to meet you, Lord Ordile. I am Rain." Reifus curtsied with ladylike grace while keeping a safe distance from the man.

"Oh, no need to be so formal. Just call me John, Princess."

"Ah, y-yes... Lord...John..." Reifus looked up to find John had closed the distance between them with a smile. Reifus drew away from him.

The more Reifus considered John's attitude, the more he got the feeling John knew his true identity. But if so, why was John calling him "princess"?

"Aaah, fine weather we're having." John looked up and launched into a passionate monologue. "It would be a waste for you to waste it in this dark castle, golden princess that you ar— Buhfwha!"

"Out of the way."

Someone approaching John from behind kicked him away, sending him flying. He was propelled from Reifus's field of vision, leaving a haughty-looking girl standing in his place.

"I swear... Whenever you meet a pretty girl, you immediately step in to cajole her. This is why men are insufferable..."

The eyepatch girl glared at John, who was lying on the ground twitching, through her sole eye like he was filth. John instantly recovered and sat up, calling out in protest.

“To converse with pretty ladies is every man’s calling— Bwhaaaaaaaa!”

“Who said you have permission to speak, maggot?” The eyepatch girl stepped on his head again.

Reifus felt himself break into a cold sweat as he watched the eyepatch girl grind her heel on the back of John’s head and glare daggers at him. Reifus considered remarking that it wasn’t acceptable for a lady to treat a count’s son like this, but he realized he was too overwhelmed by what he was seeing and held his tongue.

“Aaah, forgive me, Lady Victoricaaaaaa!”

John, however, seemed oddly happy to have the girl step on his head. Reifus wasn’t sure what to make of that—however, thanks to John’s squealing, he learned the girl’s name was Victorica, a name he’d heard when Fifi gave Mary a message.

“My apologies if this maggot scared you, Princess Rain. My name is Victorica,” the eyepatch girl said in a gentle tone, recognizing Reifus’s caution but mistakenly believing it was aimed at John. The look on her face had gone from one of utter disgust toward the man groveling on the floor to a gentle smile in a matter of seconds.

“I-It’s fine...” Reifus stammered, unsure how to react. Much like with John, he was surprised by Victorica’s words and had to ask, “U-Um, why do you keep calling me ‘princess’...?”

“Oh, no need to play dumb.” Victorica cut her off and spoke like she understood everything. “Thanks to my brilliant mind, within which House Bloodrain’s wisdom slumbers, I understand everything.”

Hearing the words “House Bloodrain” made him understand that she meant the vampire clan—being royalty, Reifus had heard of them. He doubted it’d come to this, but surely Victorica didn’t intend to break her family’s ties with Aldia, did she?

“Since that woman is so adamant about protecting you, coupled with the refined grace you have, you’re undoubtedly the princess of some ruined kingdom. She probably exposed your identity and wanted to use you for

whatever plans she has for this land. And now House Ordile is involved... Keh, keh, keh. With my deductive ability, I have deciphered this whole incident!”

Reifus was stunned by Victorica’s confident explanation. He had no idea how she’d come to this absurd conclusion, and he had no idea if he should tell her the truth or not. Victorica seemed to have no intention of interrogating Reifus either, taking his silence as consent to do as she wished.

“Even if that is true, why do this?” Reifus asked, holding back the desire to correct her but desperate to glean more information.

“My apologies for resorting to forceful means, but I have to prove that I am stronger and better than that woman. Learning you were in her care was just the chance I needed.”

“H-Huh? What woman?”

Apparently, this wasn’t a diplomatic incident, but a personal grudge between Victorica and a specified person. He had to ask.

“Mary Regalia! Who else?! I won’t rest until I beat that evil vixen to a pulp and teach her a lesson!”

Seeing Victorica declare this and clench her fist in determination, Reifus was torn between wanting Mary to come to his rescue and honestly wishing she would stay away and avoid making the situation any worse.

15. Onward, to Castle Bloodrain! Part 2

“Achoo!” I sneezed.

“Are you all right, Lady Mary? If you’re cold, I can get you out a coat,” Tutte asked me in concern.

“No, I’m fine. I bet someone’s gossiping about me,” I said, bringing up the old cliché.

“Is that how it works? I’m surprised you know about it then.” Tutte took my words seriously and looked impressed.

I guess jokes like that don’t exist in this world... I should watch what I say.

“Shouldn’t we take a break though, Lady Mary? The divine beast must be tired after being on the move all morning,” Instructor Alice suggested as we approached the entrance to the gorge.

This was reasonable, so I decided to let Snow rest. At Instructor Alice’s suggestion, we landed in a forest in the gorge.

“Ugghhh, I’m tired... I’m gonna snooze for a bit...”

Snow lay languidly and rested her chin on the ground.

“Thanks for carrying us all the way here, Snow. Does flying tire you out?” I asked, patting her head encouragingly.

“I mean, if I have to fly for this long... You call it flying, but it’s more like running on air for me, so it does consume my stamina and mana.”

“Really? Ah, if you need mana, I can give you some using magic, like that one time,” I said, referencing the time we saved Lily by sharing my mana.

“That places a lot of strain on the caster, so it should probably only be used in emergencies. It’d break my heart if something happened to you.”

“Snow...” I scratched her behind the ears thankfully, grateful for her caring about me even when she was exhausted.

“But I guess in your case you have monstrous amounts of mana, so there’s no

need to worry. A better reason not to is that if I let you do it, you'll just replenish my mana all the time and use me as your pack mule. I think I'll pass."

The divine beast nonchalantly ruined the touching moment.

"Oho ho, well, when you put it that way, I say we replenish your mana so you can get back to work," I said with an icy smile and sidled over to her.

"Ack, put my paw in my mouth there, didn't I?" Snow cowered and slipped away from me. *"I guess I just let my thoughts reach you without any filter... No one being able to hear you for years will do that to a divine beast."*

"Um, Lady Mary... How long are you going to keep me strung up like this?" Instructor Alice, still wrapped up like a cocoon, asked apologetically as I chased Snow around.

"I mean, we can't untie you. Who knows what you'll do?" I said thoughtlessly.

"How could you say something so mean?!"

Oops, I took a page out of Snow's book and said my thoughts aloud. Gotta be careful!

Feeling some remorse, I untied Instructor Alice. She spent a while sitting away from us, dejected. In the meanwhile, I rested with Snow while eating the meal Tutte prepared for us.

"I'm impressed, Tutte. When did you learn to cook at a camp?"

Yes, Tutte had prepared this meal skillfully despite the wilderness we were in, like some kind of adventurer from a cartoon.

"I'm still inexperienced at this, but I was practicing in secret in case the need called for it."

"What do you mean, if the need called for it?"

"I meant, in case you make a huge mistake and need to go out on a journey as a hero. If things come to that, I'll be ready to escort you!"

"Tutte..."

"Lady Mary!"

Tutte's devotion warmed my heart, but at the same time, her words filled me

with concern.

“I-I mean, things won’t come to that... Hopefully,” I whispered to her, given that Instructor Alice was within earshot. Tutte simply smiled back at me. But seeing that kind, knowing smile made me all the more anxious.

“It won’t happen! Never. You’re joking, right? Please, tell me you’re joking!” My composure finally snapped and I grabbed her by the shoulders and started to shake her. Tutte, however, remained all smiles.

“Aah, that was a nice nap... Okay, let’s set out for the castl— What are you two doing?”

I heard Snow’s voice in my head, signaling she woke up. She looked at me with surprise because I was sulking in the corner with Instructor Alice.

“I was joking, Lady Mary. Please don’t fret,” Tutte said in an attempt to cheer me up.

I’d intended to sulk a while longer, but with Snow awake, I needed to get back to business.

“Right, I don’t have time to sit here depressed. We have to save Lady Rain!” I hopped to my feet.

“That’s the spirit, Lady Mary!” Tutte clapped.

Hmm, I’m getting the feeling this isn’t so much like a fairytale knight saving a princess as it is a lady hero going on a journey... But no, I’m just imagining things! At least, I hope so. Make it so I’m just imagining things...

As I approached Snow, that thought creeped into my mind, but I instantly denied it, asking a nondescript someone for help.

***

While Mary and her friends were headed for the castle, Reifus was met with quite the surprise. While he’d initially dreaded finding out what being abducted would be like, he was surprised to find he would be treated quite well as a guest. He deemed it too dangerous to run, the area being what it was, and decided to stay in the castle. Besides, the person he wanted to question about the circlet was there too.

“But I can’t quite manage to talk to him alone...”

Reifus sighed, unsure what to do, as he basked in the castle’s large bath. The reason behind his sighing was Victorica. She was plastered to Reifus, trying to promote herself as a better person than Mary, and she wouldn’t let him get anywhere near John.

Reifus couldn’t speak any more than a few words to John at a time, but he did manage to at least draw John’s attention to the circlet. However, John didn’t seem to think anything of it, only responding to Reifus’s gestures with “No ornament can compare to your beauty. I can only see you!”

He even considered clueing Victorica in and revealing his identity to the two of them, but Reifus didn’t know what that girl was thinking. On top of that, Reifus had the bad feeling that Victorica would just end up blaming Mary for something or other. Considering all that, he couldn’t frivolously make such a decision.

For the time being, Victorica was treating Reifus with caution and politeness, and she didn’t seem inclined to hurt him. She was almost frighteningly friendly, in fact. But the way she treated John was terrible.

Reifus came to realize that Victorica treated men and women very differently—she was very cordial with women, but terribly harsh to men. Of course, John’s behavior was far from commendable, and whenever he tried to woo Reifus, Victorica showed up to stomp on him. At some point, Reifus began suspecting that John was doing it intentionally for the express purpose of getting stepped on.

“I just don’t know enough... What should I do?” Reifus muttered.

“No need to hesitate, I say! I will handle everything for you, Princess Rain.” Victorica’s voice cut into Reifus’s musing.

Reifus turned around in a start. He didn’t feel much ashamed to be seen naked, but seeing someone else—namely, a girl—in the nude did embarrass him, so he hung his head to avert his gaze. As he faltered, unsure of where to look, he felt someone approach him. Victorica slowly slipped into the bath beside him.

Reifus turned to look at her, only to immediately have the sight of her fair, smooth skin fill his field of vision. He hurriedly fixed his gaze on Victorica's face. It was then that he realized that Victorica didn't take her eyepatch off even in the bath.



“That eyepatch...”

“It’s a precious heirloom left by my mother. I do not take it off unless some important reason calls for it. Heh heh, I imagine your circlet is much the same?”

Victorica’s story felt like it had so much weight to it that Reifus felt very uncomfortable having his own plight compared to it. He simply smiled back at her feebly. The circlet was, after all, a cursed item of sorts that he couldn’t take off even if he wanted to.

Come to think of it, Victorica’s parents were nowhere in sight. “Where is your mother...?” Reifus asked carelessly.

Victorica paused briefly to consider her words. “Her lifespan has run its course. My mother was a human woman. I am a miracle born from the union of my parents’ love, a child of both vampire and human blood. This eye has passed down to me from my mother.” Victorica gazed on Reifus with her blue eye, the one not covered by the eyepatch.

“I-I see. And your father?”

“My father relinquished his seat as the head of House Bloodrain to me. My mother’s dream was for the two of them to travel the world, and he departed with her to make her wish come true.” Victorica looked up at the ceiling, looking a bit lonely. “I’m sure he is out there somewhere, traveling with Mother’s skull in one hand.”

The story initially struck Reifus as quite heartwarming, but he found the last part very ghastly, leaving him unsure of how to reply. But then, Victorica clenched her fist and shook it.

“I am a new brand of vampire, borne of their blissful dream, who now controls the ancient, honorable House Bloodrain. And that...blasted, evil vixen will pay dearly for humiliating me like she did!!!”

She grit her teeth, baring her fangs in the process, her anger all too palpable. Reifus could only laugh dryly. One had to wonder what Mary could have done to anger this girl so much. To Reifus, Victorica seemed like a girl who jumps to conclusions easily, so it was quite possible Mary did nothing at all.

“I will prove that I, the head of the great House Bloodrain, am superior to her! I will stop at nothing to make that happen!”

At the same time, Reifus saw a bit of himself in the pride and responsibility Victorica felt toward her background and her determination to live up to it.

“Even if it means having to take it away from her by force...” Victorica trailed off there.

Without realizing it, Reifus cracked a gentle smile and patted Victorica, who was adamantly stating her intentions, on the head, much like an older sister trying to soothe a younger sister. Victorica stared at Reifus, surprised, only to lower her clenched fist a few seconds later. She closed her sole eye and obediently allowed Reifus to pat her head, reveling in the sensation.

“Lady Victorica.”

Their quiet moment was disturbed when a maid called out to them from the entrance to the bath.

“Speak freely. I will allow it,” Victorica replied.

“Certainly. Our minions keeping watch at the gorge report that the Argent Holy Woman is approaching the castle with a divine beast.”

Reifus stiffened in place, then looked at Victorica in concern. The vampire curled her lips up with evil glee.

“Keh, keh, keh! So you came here alone this quickly, Argent Holy Woman. However, you will soon learn that you must pass through the dungeon if you are to enter the castle!”

“A dungeon...?” Reifus swallowed nervously. There was something this dangerous here?

“Keh, keh, keh. Will she be able to overcome all the monsters and traps House Bloodrain has laboriously prepared over the generations whenever we had free time? I look forward to seeing her try!”

“L-Laboriously?”

Somehow, the way Victorica had said it was oddly lacking in suspense. It only made Reifus feel less nervous.

“Now, come at me, Argent Holy Woman! I will not hand over this new older sister of mine so easily!” she declared, rising from the bathwater in a splash.

Reifus hurriedly looked away, and he also felt like the vampire girl had just said something very off. But at that moment, he couldn’t quite place his finger on what it was.

16. Showdown against the Oldest, Strongest Vampire!

Instructor Alice led us to the entrance of an elaborately designed dungeon. “We must cross this dungeon to enter Castle Bloodrain,” she explained.

I noticed there was something carved into the reliefs decorating the entrance. “There’s something written there. Maybe it’s some kind of hackneyed warning like ‘Curse be upon whoever sets foot in this dungeon.’”

“Let’s see...” Tutte leaned in and read the inscription. “It says ‘Welcome to Castle Bloodrain! A fun undead dungeon experience awaits you!’”

I furrowed my brow at the absurd content of the engraving, and Tutte watched me with concern.

“What are you doing, Lady Mary? Let’s hurry and go in,” Instructor Alice said, suddenly becoming very enthusiastic.

Spurred on by her insistence, I entered the dungeon with a heavy heart. “Instructor Alice, you’re very assertive all of a sudden,” I noted.

“Of course I am! This place is simply crawling with lovely undead! Not getting excited here would be imposib— Aaaaah!”

The moment Instructor Alice set foot in the entrance, the floor opened underneath her with a thud, and before the reality of what happened could register in either of our minds, she began falling, her voice fading out as she continued to descend.

I finally realized that there was a trap hole set at the entrance to the dungeon and scrambled over to look inside.

“I-Instructor Aliiiice!” I called out. “Wait, who sets a trap hole at the very entrance?! That’s evil! Don’t you care about the excitement and tension of approaching a dungeon?! The devs should patch this out!”

“Um, Lady Mary, I don’t think now’s the time to complain about...whatever it is you’re talking about...” Tutte, who had taken a few steps away from us in

surprise, silently cut into my criticism.

“O-Oh, right, we have to save Instructor Alice...” I peered into the hole again, but all I could see was darkness.

“Lady Mary, I’m fine!” Instructor Alice’s voice echoed from the bottom. “There’s a slime that serves to cushion the fall at the bottom. Also, there’s a house down here!”

I was relieved to hear she wasn’t hurt, but I also had to wonder about what kind of dungeon sets a cushion at the bottom of its trap holes. But then...

“Aaah, oh goodness! There’s a horrible trap here!” she screamed.

“I-Instructor Alice!” I called out again.

“Oh, what am I to do?! These are skeletons! So many skeletons! Oh, what’s wrong, my pretties? Why are you running?! Aaah, wait for meeeeee!” she shouted from afar in a sweet, fawning voice. I could almost hear the cartoon hearts popping around her.

I pursed my lips peevishly. “I think Instructor Alice is fine.” I concluded. “She’ll get out of there on her own.”

“H-Huh? Are you sure you’re all right with that, Lady Mary...?” Tutte questioned my decision.

“Don’t worry about it! Let’s keep going and believe in her!” I forcibly persuaded Tutte and entered the dungeon.

Honestly, having to walk through this place felt very tiresome. I’d figured we’d fly and enter the castle via the air, but I realized on the way to the castle it’d be harder than I’d anticipated. The grounds had been surrounded by a thick mist full of flying monsters—I’d have been fine, of course, but I hadn’t been so sure about everyone else. As such, we’d decided to land and traverse the dungeon.

“What’s wrong, Lady Lily?” Tutte said, looking behind us quizzically.

“Hm? Is Lily up to something?” I asked, following her gaze and finding Lily looking not at the front of the dungeon, but to the left. “What is it?”

I turned to face the same direction as our resident cub...and found myself

looking at a single zombie standing there. It was standing by the wall, doing something that produced rustling sounds, then it walked off, seemingly uninterested in us.

“...What was that zombie doing?”

“...Oh, Lady Mary, there’s a sign there,” Tutte said before hurrying over to the spot where the zombie had been moments ago, finding there was a wooden sign dangling there.

Shaking off my surprise, I approached the sign. “There’s something written on it... Hmm. ‘There is a shortcut through the dungeon here. Those short on time are welcome to use it.’”

The three of us fell silent for a moment, and then started looking for the switch that would open the shortcut.

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After walking down a dim corridor for a while, we found ourselves in a large entrance hall. We then climbed up the staircase there, finding Victorica and Orbus standing there with their backs turned to us, facing another exit. We called out to them, and...

“Why did you come out through there?!” Victorica shouted at us.

“Because you told us about the secret shortcut?” I asked, confused by why she was so surprised. “I mean, that zombie was kind enough to put the sign there.”

“Orbuuuuus!” Victorica got in the face of her handsome butler.

“Yes, but you must understand, milady,” Orbus said with a calm, elegant smile. “The zombies can’t distinguish guests from non-guests, and it was you who gave the order to put up the sign if anyone showed up.”

“Gaaah...! Yes, it was I, come to think of it!” Victorica gripped her head and grumbled. “It was so long ago that I’d forgotten! It’s been so peaceful that I’ve only ever had guests come to the castle, so I just gave that blasted order to make it easy for them!”

I simply watched on, amused. This was funny.

“...I feel an odd sense of affinity for Mr. Orbus, all of a sudden,” Tutte whispered to herself.

“Hmm? What do you mean, Tutte dear?” I turned to look at her with a beaming smile.

“O-Oh, erm, nothing.” Tutte hurriedly defended herself. “I didn’t mean to say you and Lady Victorica are alike in how you mess up... Not at all, no. Certainly not.”

“Oho, I see you want to be sentenced to tickling again!” I said, approaching Tutte while wiggling my finger.

Tutte went pale, remembering the ticklish hell I’d subjected her to previously.

“Hey, you two are acting the same way!” Snow said, jerking her jaw toward Victorica as a way to prompt my attention.

I turned to look that way, mildly annoyed, only to spot Victorica also approaching Orbus, who had also made a slip of the tongue somehow, her fingers awiggle.

“...Ahem!” I lowered my hands and cleared my throat loudly.

Hearing me, Victorica stopped and cleared her throat as well, straightening her back.

“Well, what’s done is done. Either way...” Victorica looked at us, put a hand over her eyepatch and struck a dignified pose. “Weeeeelcome to Castle Bloodrain! Keh keh keh. It’s no wonder they call you the Argent Holy Woman! You exceed my expectations at every turn.”

“No, that’s not me. And I didn’t do that—you just ruined your own plan,” I said, raining on Victorica’s attempt to make a smooth recovery.

“Grrrrr!” Victorica’s face went red as she became teary-eyed.

“Aaah, s-sorry!” I apologized, not expecting her to take it that hard. “But more importantly, where’s Lady Rain?! She’s unharmed, right?”

“Oh, yes, she’s well-tended to!” Victorica beamed, perhaps glad I’d moved away from that topic. Easily pleased girl, that one. “And you have no role to play here anymore. You may leave. I, Victorica Bloodrain, will take care of her

problem.”

“‘Take care of her problem’? Do you have any idea what you’re talking about?”

“Yes, of course. That circlet is the source of her troubles, yes?”

“H-Huh, how do you...? Did Lady Rain tell you?” I was surprised, since I’d assumed Victorica was ignorant of the situation.

“No, but with my wisdom, I could easily discern the situation. I am, after all, better than you in every way,” Victorica said, puffing up her chest victoriously. Speaking of which...

Yeah, looks about the same as mine, I noted to myself, relieved. It felt like I’d been defeated on the bust front more often than not recently, so this was cause for celebration.

“Given how she didn’t take it off even in the bath, I can only assume it’s some treasured memento of her fallen land. And since I can sense mana emanating from it, she was probably hoping to use it to do something in this land as her domain’s last remaining princess. Aah, such a pure, noble person she is,” Victorica mumbled this to herself. I was overcome with relief, although I could only hear snippets of her spiel.

“Anyway, your role here is done. Scurry back to your domain, vertically impaired lady.” Victorica made a shooing gesture with a warm smile on her lips. Then her eyes wandered down to my chest, and she snorted. That took the cake, and I lost my temper.

Oh, so you stoop to this, huh? All right, if you want a fight, you got one.

What made me all the more outraged is that she was pretty much the same as me in every metric.

“Excuse me, but turning around and leaving just because you said so would besmirch the Regalia name. You should hand Lady Rain back to us and go to sleep in your castle, vertically impaired miss,” I said, flashing an indomitable smile.

Victorica paused and met my smile with one of her own.

“It seems fate would inevitably have us clash. However, you don’t have a ghost of a chance at winning, for I am the oldest, strongest vampire, Victorica Bloodr—”

“Turn Undead!” In a repeat of last night, I chanted holy magic before she could finish speaking.

A pillar of light formed under her.

“Nghaaaaa!” I heard her let out an adorable screech from inside the column.

“L-Lady Mary, I think you’re going too far...” Tutte took a stunned step back from me, taken aback by my cruelty.

“Never grow timid if you seek to win! That’s what father always says. I’ll heed his advice and won’t hold back,” I said victoriously, clenching my fist.

“No, I don’t think that’s what the master went when he said that...”

I ignored Tutte’s retort and examined my opponent as the pillar of light died down. As she came into view, it was clear Victorica was gasping for air.

“Wow, she’s sturdy. All right, take another Turn Undeeeead!” I decided and prepared to chant.

“Orbus!” Victorica called out to Orbus, who turned pale from the memory of what I’d inflicted on him last time, and...

“Huh?”

She tugged him by the arm and changed positions with him, throwing into the range of my spell.

“Ughaaaaaaaa!” The handsome butler screamed as the light overtook him.

“Whoa...” I was creeped out.

I wasn’t one to talk, perhaps, but seeing her stoop to any means to win this caught me by surprise. I snuck a glance at Tutte, who gulped like she was preparing for the worst.

“I wouldn’t do that!” I turned around and snapped at her despite being in the middle of battle.

“Such cowardice! I cannot believe you would do that to my butler...” Victorica

muttered bitterly.

I faced forward again to look at her, taken aback by the absurd accusation. “Don’t pin this on me! *You* did this to him!”

“...Keh keh keh. It seems you’re intent on making me take this battle seriously!” She was plainly ignoring me. “Allow me to show you what I can do when I unleash the vampiric blood sealed within me!”

Victorica grabbed at her eyepatch and tore it off...or not. She carefully undid the threads and handled it with care, folding it and placing it in her pocket. I couldn’t help but be taken by surprise by how carefully she’d removed it.

“The seal is undone! Awaken, my power!” Victorica struck another pose and slowly opened the eye hidden behind the eyepatch.

Much like Orbus’s eyes, her once covered eye was black with a red, glowing iris.



Wow, mismatched eyes! That's so cool!

She was making a pretty cringey speech, but I was just as much a sucker for this sort of thing as she was, it seemed.

"Heed my voice! My name is Victorica Bloodrain! The time has come to yield the dark power of the vile abyss to me! Come forth, my faithful servant!"

"Oooh!" I cooed at her speech and pose, as well as the magic circle forming behind her. It looked like something straight out of an anime.

"Summon Minion!" Victorica spoke words of power, and another large magic circle appeared in front of her, a gigantic...something emerging from it.

"Huh?!" I couldn't help but gasp as I saw its giant form emerge.

"It can't be! A bone dragon?!" Snow's voice filled my head, telling me the name of the creature I was looking at.

Before us was a gigantic dragon made entirely of bone. It lowered its head, as this large hall was still too small for its frame, and its empty black eye sockets burned with red light.

Bony though it may have been, dragons stood head and shoulders above everyone else in this world, and their strength was unfathomable. Even Snow, a divine beast, was terrified by it. If Victorica had this thing as her minion, she must have truly been a powerful figure.

"Keh, keh, keh... This is why I am known as the oldest, strongest vampire! Oh, but to make it clear, the 'oldest' part refers to House Bloodrain, and the 'strongest' part refers to me, because I'm exceptionally powerful among its members." The self-proclaimed oldest, strongest vampire must have felt quite confident, because she found it in herself to offer commentary in the midst of everything.

"Now go forth, bone dragon, and toy with this girl for a bit!" Victorica instructed, and the bone dragon replied with a thunderous roar.

"Snow, take Lily and Tutte and get them out of..." I bravely started instructing her, but then turned around. "Huh?"

I found the divine beast I was talking to had vanished, as she was sprinting

away and had already gotten a good distance away. She'd grabbed Tutte by her collar and was dragging her along, and Tutte herself was holding Lily in her arms.

"Heeeey! I was going to tell you to lead them out of here and help me fight this thing!" I shouted at her in complaint, my back turned to the danger closing in on me.

The bone dragon swept its tail at me, and then...a loud thud shook the hall as the dragon's tail was shattered to bits.

"Huh?!"

Victorica, who'd been watching triumphantly thus far, as well as Orbus both watched this take place with amazed eyes. Their shock made sense, since I hadn't done anything and the tail had hit me directly from behind, yet the tail had shattered in a spectacular manner the moment it'd made contact with my body.

I watched the bone fragments scatter around me silently, then shifted my gaze to Victorica and Orbus's stunned faces, followed by observing the bone dragon, which was looking at its missing tail with what probably passed for surprise among skeletal creatures without facial features.

"Teehee! ♪" I winked and stuck out my tongue, cocking my head against my hand in an "oopsie daisy" sort of manner.

"Do not 'Teehee' me! What was that just now?! Are you actually human?!"

"Hey, that's offensive! I'm totally a normal human. Maybe your dragon is falling apart because it just doesn't have enough calcium! Maybe it has, like, osteoporosis! Maybe you're just not taking care of your minion well enough, Victorica! ♪"

At this point, I became unreasonably stubborn and resorted to just acting cute and playing dumb.

"Calci-what...? Osteopo... I haven't any clue what you're talking about, but it sounds like you're blaming me, and I won't stand for that! You're the weird one here, and that's a fact!" Victorica argued back vehemently.

I approached Victorica with a smile on my lips. The bone dragon that stood between us hurriedly scrambled away from me—which I pretended not to notice. The closer I came to her, the more she backed away from me, and Orbus simply stood rooted in place, looking at us.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What are you doing?! Y-You’re weird!” Victorica squeaked as I backed her against the wall.

I slammed my hand against the wall next to her head, drawing on my Japanese origins to execute the ancient technique known as the wall slam.

“Your minion’s bones are brittle because it has osteoporosis,” I explained graciously, smiling unflinchingly and drawing my face closer to hers. “Osteoporosis is a disease where your bone tissue dissipates, making your bones fragile and easy to break. That’s why it’s tail broke, understood? You should take better care of your minion, Victorica.”

“Y-Yesh...” Victorica squealed, caving under my pressure and nodding with tears in her eyes.

17. The Showdown Ended. However...

“Miss Mary, Miss Victorica, there’s no reason for you two to fight— Huh?”

When I was done ‘persuading’ Victorica, I heard Lady Rain’s voice from afar. I turned to look in the direction the voice came from and found her approaching us in a pretty dress with makeup on, and vampire maids were being dragged along after her.

The maids were probably trying to stop her from coming over, but she hurried over despite that. Seeing her made me heave a sigh of relief, and I lowered my hands from the wall.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Lady—” I started speaking, but then Victorica bolted from behind me.

“Aaaaaaaaaaah, big sisteeeeeer! I was scared! I was so scaaaaaaaared!” The vampire girl ran over to Lady Rain in tears.

Lady Rain finally shook off the maids, only for Victorica to throw her arms

around her next. Lady Rain started patting her on the head to comfort her.

What Victorica had said filled me with inexplicable anxiety. *Did she just call Rain her "big sister"?! Oh, no, I have a bad feeling about this...*

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"So?! Why did all this happen? Explain yourself!"

We were led into Victorica's guest room, where her maids served us tea. We decided to agree on a temporary truce.

"Waaah... Big sister, that evil vixen is frightening me!" Victorica, who was sitting on the two-seater sofa opposite mine, clung to Lady Rain's arm. Lady Rain was sitting beside her with a very bemused smile.

"W-Well, um, yes, you should probably calm yourself, Miss Mary," she said diplomatically.

I didn't know when Lady Rain got so close to Victorica, but she seemed to be siding with her and trying to talk me down. Or rather, I wasn't sure if they were getting along so much as Victorica was being one-sidedly attached to her...

"And, Miss Victorica? Why did you do all this?" Lady Rain kindly asked her in my place.

"L-Like I said... I wanted to compete with her..." Victorica muttered awkwardly.

"That's what I don't understand!" I said, flaring up again. "I've never met you before! Why is it so important we compete?! Did I do something to offend you?"

"Umm, I, uh, well..." Victorica became teary-eyed again, despite having just been calmed down by Lady Rain. Lady Rain patted her on the head gently.

What is this scenario? I feel like a second sister scolding the spoiled third sister for making a mess while the elder sister watches over the two of us kindly.

Thinking of that oddly specific image somehow took all the anger out of me.

"Lady Elizabeth said..." Victorica mumbled.

"Huh?" I stared at her, not expecting to hear that name brought up.

“Since I woke up early, I thought to go give my regards to her after so long...and all she would talk about was Mary this, Mary that... All I want is to be Lady Elizabeth’s dependable subordinate, and...and never before have I faced such humiliation!”

I’d gotten used to her waterworks so much that I was taken aback when she suddenly started sulking.

“Oooh, uh, so that’s... Hmm... That’s what happened, huh?” I said, recalling the events in the Relirex Kingdom. “W-Well, you shouldn’t take everything she says so seriously... I mean, she’s very verbose, that lady, and has a way of embellishing events.... A-And besides, I don’t intend to be her subordinate or anything.”

I raised my teacup, hoping to calm myself, but it clattered too hard for me to drink. Tutte gently snatched the cup from my hands before it started cracking in my grip.

“I felt pretty vexed about the things she said, and I didn’t think I could let it go, so I decided I would cause some trouble for Mary.” Victorica averted her eyes in a sulking manner and confessed her reasons.

“Heeey! You put me through this mess over that?!” I leaned in and protested scaldingly.

“Eek!” Victorica cowered from me and clung to Lady Rain again.

“There, there, calm down, Miss Mary,” Lady Rain admonished me with a slightly bothered expression.

“Big—” I nearly blurted out, but stopped myself.

I almost said “Big sister, why are you always siding with her?” Phew, that was close.

I leaned back against the sofa, shaking off that mental image, while the other two looked at me, baffled. The conversation had momentarily gotten off track, and silence settled over the room. But suddenly, the doors swung open.

“Aah, I see you’re done talking, beauteous princess? Then why don’t you spend a tender moment chatting with me next?” A man waltzed into the room,

a glittering smile on his face and cringe-inducing words leaving his lips.

“Oh, good timing,” Lady Rain said, seemingly unperturbed by the man’s attitude and instructing a maid to usher him to a seat. “I would like for you to listen in on what I’m about to say, Sir John.”

Wait, John? Like, Count Ordile’s son? Right, he was here in this castle...

Then I recalled something important. “Oh, we aband—um, we left Instructor Alice in the dungeon,” I said.

“Oh, I sent Orbus to fetch her. Though he seemed quite unwilling to deal with her...” Victorica said.

“Oh, thank you. Quick thinking on your behalf,” I gave her my honest thanks.

“W-Well, I most certainly did not do it for you.” Victorica turned her face the other way peevishly for some reason.

What’s with this youngest sister? A bad case of tsundere?

I got the sudden urge to pat her on the head and pester her by doing so, but restrained myself as John sat down.

“Allow me to tell you, then,” Lady Rain said. “I will share everything that happened to me with you.”

Silence hung over the room as Lady Rain looked over everyone’s faces, and Victorica and John both swallowed nervously like they were expecting to hear something very important.

“Firstly, Sir John. Do you recognize my circlet?”

“Aha ha ha. Yes, well, for a princess as fair as you, such a crude circlet... C-C-Circlet...” As he got a proper look at the circlet, John started trailing off.

Oh, he got it— I thought to myself in relief.

“...Aha ha ha, surely I’m imagining things,” John broke into a cold sweat, clearly refusing to acknowledge the reality of the situation. “I thought I’d seen it somewhere before, but... Surely, I’m mistaking it for something else.”

“Well, I discovered this circlet in an underground room under Altolia Academy,” Lady Rain carried on.

John visibly tensed up, while Victorica looked on quizzically, unsure of what this all meant.

“O-Oh, r-r-r-really? At the academy, you say...” He looked away from us, his eyes darting about and all the glittering from earlier gone.

“We found a diary in the box containing the circlet. Miss Mary, do you have it with you?” Lady Rain looked to me.

“Ah, yes.” I turned to Tutte, who handed me the diary without a hitch.

Having a capable maid can be scary sometimes.

“Sir John, do you recognize this diary? I could read it aloud, if it would jog your memory,” I proposed, waving the diary.

“No, no no no no no, there’s no need for that! I know this diary! I recognize it! No need to read it aloud, please!”

Yeah, I know what having your embarrassing past exposed feels like. I do. I can relate.

His reaction made it clear that he was, indeed, the Mr. Perfect Man we were looking for.

“Huh? So you’re saying you’re wearing that circlet...which means...” John looked at Lady Rain with alarm in his eyes.

She nodded calmly.

“With your refined countenance, and your connection to House Regalia, that would mean...you’re actually...” John started trembling.

Lady Rain nodded again, and John hung his head in shock.

“If I knew it’d give you such a perfect figure, I’d have made the change myself!” He clenched his fist bitterly and started complaining about something very trivial. “And then I’d be able to look at myself as a beautiful woman!”

I believed his facial features depended on his original face, but I wasn’t sure how it’d affect his figure. In particular, how was one’s bust size decided in this case? But that didn’t matter at the moment.

“...Ahem.” Lady Rain cleared her throat, trying to dispel the strange mood

hanging in the air. “So, Sir John, how would I go about removing this circlet?”

“Huh? You can’t remove it?” John asked, baffled.

“Huh?” Lady Rain’s voice overlapped with mine as we both exclaimed in surprise.

“What are you saying? Weren’t you the one that—” I asked.

“No, Miss Shelly was the one who mostly made that circlet,” John said apologetically. “All I did was make the circlet’s foundation, so I don’t know the details. She’d never said it was unremovable. It should have been always removable, and its effect should have only lasted a day. After a day, it was supposed to come off on its own and have its effects completely disappear.”

I didn’t get the impression John was lying, and he had no reason to lie either. But if that was true, why was Lady Rain still a girl? Just then, I recalled what Fifi had said.

“Lady Rain, Fifi mentioned she felt some kind of obsession emanating from the circlet, but she never said anything about it coming off on its own.”

“True enough. This means either Shelly lied to Sir John or something even she didn’t expect happened to the circlet.”

While Lady Rain and I discussed the situation seriously, Victorica, who was very much being left out, looked between us in confusion.

“It seems the situation is nothing like what I’d imagined, but if I follow, you want to remove your circlet, big sister?” Victorica asked, puzzled.

“That’s the long and short of it, yes.”

“Then why not ask Shelly about it?” Victorica pondered.

“We don’t know where she is, which is why we came to meet Count Ordile’s son...” I said with a sigh.

“But Shelly was recently here. She woke me up from my slumber because she had business with me,” Victorica said, casually dropping this bombshell.

“Huh?” Lady Rain’s and my voices overlapped again.

The fact Shelly had been here was shocking enough on its own, and the fact it

was her who'd awakened Victorica from her prolonged sleep was a complete double whammy.

I suddenly realized something important I had to make sure of and drew closer to Victorica. "W-Wait just a second. You're saying that you know who the Shelly we're talking about is?"

"Huh? You mean the wandering magus smith elf, yes?" Victorica said, shocking me by getting it right on her first try.

"That's right. Huh? But, how? How do you know her?" I asked further.

Feeling like she'd gotten the upper hand, Victorica flashed an evil smile at me. "Hmm, well, I don't know... Should I tell you? Maybe you should try asking a little more nicely?"

Grr, this little! I thought to myself, a smile plastered on my lips but a vein bulging in my forehead.

"Could you tell us, Miss Victorica?" Lady Rain asked.

"Yes, big sister!" Victorica replied happily.

"Why, I oughta!" I trembled angrily.

"Patience, Lady Mary. Be patient," Tutte leaned in from behind to calm me.

"I've known Shelly for many years, and this castle's vault is full of precious items and reagents she's gathered in her travels," Victorica explained. "She drops by every now and then to collect them."

I recalled what Instructor Alice had told me on the way here. *So all those items were Shelly's... I guess it's hard to see what's under your nose—or more like, it's a small world...*

"So, where is she now?" Lady Rain carried the conversation on.

Victorica, however, fell silent there.

"Miss Victorica?" Lady Rain pressed her for an answer.

"E-Erm... I feel like she might have mentioned something, but I was still half-asleep, so I forget..." Victorica said, making a cute gesture.

"Y-Y-Y-You dunce!" I'd reached the end of my rope. I got to my feet, grabbed

her by the shoulders, and started shaking her. “Remember it! Come on, remember what she said! Right here, right now, wake up those generations of slumbering wisdom in your head and remember!”

“I-I-I-I can’t just, can’t remember... Aaaah, aaah, I remember now, I-I think I’m starting to remember!” Victorica suddenly recalled something as I shook her.

I stopped shaking her and looked at her with expectant eyes. “Well? What is it?”

“...Erm. I think she said she was going back.”

“Back? Back where?”

“Heh, back to her homeland. Where else? Isn’t that obvious?” She smirked at me like I’d asked a very foolish question.

“Well, yes, I can gather that much. What I’m asking is where her homeland is, you follow?” I directed an icy grin at her and approached her with wiggling fingers, threatening to give her another shake up.

“Eek! Aaah, erm, let me think. Where was it...?” Victorica began sifting through her memories, startled. “Some vast forest... Erm... And old, too...”

She spent a minute piecing together the answer like a contestant in some talk show.

“An old, vast forest? You mean the Ancient Forest?” Lady Rain suggested.

“Y-Yes, exactly, big sister!” Victorica turned to her with a smile.

The Ancient Forest was a vast woodland said to exist since the age of myth, containing unexplored terrain never visited by the races of man. It was a dangerous, mystical place, with some countries regarding it as a holy site while others considered it a wicked expanse. Even I knew about it, since we’d covered it in class.

“An elf living in the Ancient Forest... It does sound plausible.” I nodded.

“But even if we know she’s in there, we wouldn’t know the first thing about how to look for her. There’s barely any information available about the forest, so we can’t approach this too hastily,” Lady Rain said.

“Yeah, that makes sense...” I sighed.

But as the two of us considered what to do next...

“Keh, keh, keh...” Victorica flashed a knowing smile at us.

“Oh, right. Thank you for the information, Victorica. We need to talk things out, so go play in the corner or something,” I told her, treating her like an attention seeking child.

“Hey, you would do well to not treat me like a little girl. Besides, Mary, are you sure you want to take that kind of attitude with me?” Victorica stood in my way triumphantly again.

“What do you mean?”

“Keh, keh, keh. You see, I make it a point to always go greet my friends and those related to me, or otherwise call them over to visit me.”

Right, she did go over to announce her awakening to Count Ordile and Lady Elizabeth... Pretty active, for a vampire. As that impressed thought crossed my mind, I realized something. “Wait. If you go greet your friends, does that mean you know where Miss Shelly lives?” I looked at her with expectant eyes again.

Victorica grinned evilly. “Weeeell, I’m not sure... Maybe I know, maybe I don’t. I’m a very busy person, after all. But if you insist... Hey, Mary, maybe you should reconsider how you ask others for help?”

I had to hold back from going “Why, you little!” again, instead clenching my trembling fist with my expectant smile still on my lips. After all, it was obvious how this would end. But much to my confusion, the person who could solve this remained quiet, so Victorica and I turned to look at Lady Rain. She seemed to be lost in thought and wasn’t looking at us.

“Lady Rain?” I pleaded.

“Ah, pardon. I’m just trying to think of how we can resolve this without being any more of a burden on Victorica.”

“Huh?” This time, my voice overlapped with Victorica’s.

“I’m acquainted with someone who’s familiar with the Ancient Forest, so if you could just tell us her overall location in the forest, and maybe compose a

letter introducing us to her, it should be all we need." Lady Rain smiled kindly, implying we didn't need her to come along, which made Victorica somehow become pale even for vampire standards.

"B-B-B-Big sister, you're not a burden on me! If anything, I want to stay by your si— Erm, I want to help you if I can! I'll lead you there, then. I insist!" Victorica rattled on and on, her fangs exposed.

"I...I see." Lady Rain looked a bit taken aback. "Can I ask you to handle it, then?"

"Of course!"

And so, our next destination was decided. We spent the night at Victorica's castle and ended up spending the next day there as well. Victorica seemed very busy, swiftly finishing up all sorts of matters so she could escort us. All the while, Lady Rain watched over us, occasionally spoiling her.

I had to praise Lady Rain's mental fortitude for being able to grin at that selfish vampire the whole time. I'd probably have blown a gasket over her brattiness.

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The next day, Count Ordile personally came to visit the castle. Apparently, the messenger I'd sent upon heading out for this castle arrived, prompting him to hurry over. Normally, you could probably consider him to have quite the handsome face, but fatigue and concern were making him look quite emaciated, and he had bags under his eyes. I'd thought he was a zombie at first.

Upon hearing what happened, the count apologized profusely to Lady Rain. It was worth noting that, unlike his two children, the count was a normal man with no proclivities toward chasing around or getting stepped on by the undead.

After that, I went into Victorica's treasure vault (with her permission, of course) to look for items that would help me control my strength. I hadn't found anything useful with Fifi, but I looked around the vault hoping I would have better luck here. I figured if I found something promising, I'd beg Victorica to lend it to me. As humiliating as begging to her might have been...

“Oho ho, this is interesting. I learned something new about magic...” I muttered to myself as I read an old book I found there.

“Weren’t you looking for something to control your strength, Lady Mary?” Tutte asked.

“Ah!” I came to. “Drat, everything’s so interesting, I got distracted and forgot. If Magiluka were here, she’d probably shut herself in this vault for days.”

A skeleton standing guard over the vault approached and extended its hand. I handed it the book, and the skeleton quietly returned the book to its original spot.

“...You’re getting used to the undead, aren’t you?” Tutte asked.

“So are you.” I noted as I watched the skeleton return the book.

Looking around, I saw other skeletons cleaning the vault silently. As one would expect of a vampire castle, it was full of undead.

I can see someone becoming like Instructor Alice if they stay here for too long... But really, I’d rather not see it happen to me. I sighed as I looked around the vault.

“I can’t find any items for restraining one’s power, though...”

“Well, most people only seek to heighten their strength instead of restraining it, and items like these are made to meet people’s demands...” Tutte said with a bemused expression.

“Oh, but I can see Sacher liking this sword. And if Safina had these shoes, she could move even faster.” I recalled my friends as I looked around the place. I’d only not seen them for a few days, but I’d already started missing them.

“...Yes, indeed.” Tutte hummed in agreement.

“I wonder what they’re up to right now...” I pondered, looking up at the vault’s ceiling.

Interlude

“Aaaaaah!” Magiluka’s scream echoed through the silent underground aqueduct.

“Oh, sorry about that. I didn’t know there’d be that many.” Sacher laughed apologetically as Magiluka bolted away in a most unladylike manner.

“‘It’ll be easy,’ you said! ‘I’ll handle everything,’ you said! None of this worked out!” Magiluka glared at Sacher with tears in her eyes as she ran.

“Ooh, here they come!” Sacher disregarded her and looked back at the dark mass surging toward them from the direction they’d come.

“Eeeek!” Prompted by his report, Magiluka turned to look, and she screeched as she saw a swarm of creatures scurrying across the floor. Their bodies were covered in a black, lustrous carapace. They had a pair of antennae that twitched about, as well as multiple pairs of long, skittery legs that busily carried them forward as they gave pursuit.

If Mary was there, she’d have said, “Oh. C*ckroaches.” However, this world’s version of said creatures was much larger than that of Mary’s world, with a much larger, stronger carapace. They counted as an insect monster. Their offensive power was weak, and most people, women included, could beat them handily—assuming they had enough courage to squish them, that is.

“Can’t you just evaporate them all with a spell?”

“W-W-Well, if you shield me and focus them into one place, I can easily burn them all.”

“Aha ha ha, come on, if I did that, they’d just swarm me. I don’t want that even with my shield.”

The two’s exchange continued as the monsters gave chase. The two of them raced toward the aqueduct’s exit, where two girls stood guard. Safina was standing there to ensure no one came in, and standing alongside her was Fifi, who was inspecting the item she’d prepared for Safina.

Safina puzzledly noticed the pair running toward her. “Oh, there you are.

What hap—”

“Miss Safina, we must rethink our plans!”

“It’s dangerous here, Safinaaa!”

The two of them sped up, bolting past her as they shouted. Safina followed them with her eyes as they ran.

“...There’s prey coming.” Fifi looked down the aqueduct. “Perfect timing to test the gear.”

Hearing this, Safina drew her sword and turned to face the entrance to the aqueduct—

“Eeeegyaaaa!” Safina let out a strange squeak as she saw a swarm of creepy-crawlies creeping closer, some of them even flapping their wings and flying. She panicked and froze up.

“...Use fire,” Fifi said as she backed away.

“H-Huuuh, erm, is it this switch that applies fire to it...?!” Safina said aloud as her fingers fumbled over the magus mechanism applied to her katana’s scabbard and flipped a switch. The magus mechanism clicked loudly as it loaded. “Accel Boost! Draw! Flame Sword Flurry!”

Safina drew her sword, which flashed crimson and produced flames with every swing. With her acceleration magic and gear in effect, Safina rapidly cut down the black swarm, burning them to ash.

This was the magic gear Fifi had prepared for Safina—her katana’s scabbard was charged with multiple magus mechanisms, allowing her to temporarily apply different powers to her blade. It was an idea Mary had given Fifi during the welcoming party—and more to the point, a concept from a manga that she let slip.

“Oh, that was cool!” Sacher, who’d returned, praised and cheered her on. “You dodged with the smallest movements and cut them down one by one. That’s the mixture of Karshana martial arts with iai jutsu at work, huh? And on top of that, now you have Fifi’s gear producing flames that increase your range and lethality. That’s awesome, Safina!”

Safina didn’t respond to his compliment. Instead, she continued to swing her katana around in a panicked flurry, tears in her eyes.

“You dunce!” Magiluka chided him. “Don’t just watch! Help her, would you? Fireball!” She took advantage of Safina blocking the creatures off and threw a fireball at them.

“Oh, right! Safina, you can back down!” Sacher matched Magiluka’s timing and stepped forward, shield held up to protect her. In turn, Magiluka threw more fireballs, and within minutes, all the monsters were wiped out. Magiluka reflected on this—they could have easily handled the creatures once they’d set their minds to it, but they’d been too shocked by their sheer numbers.

“Phew. Thank you, Miss Safina...” Magiluka praised Safina for winning them this battle, but then she noticed Safina was as pale as if her soul had slipped out from the terror of it all—she looked like she was about to sink to the ground. “Ah, everything’s fine now! Stay with us, Miss Safina!”

The reason they were in this situation was quite simple. They’d investigated a group of students who focused on monster biology, and said students had snuck these monsters into the Academy without permission since they were easy to capture and relatively harmless. The creatures kept escaping as the students researched them, and none of the budding monster biologists ever bothered to address that issue. This resulted in the monsters breeding en masse in the old aqueduct, and this consequence of their actions had only been discovered recently.

“Ugh, truly... Why must everyone be so careless? I hope they manage their research more thoroughly in the future...” Magiluka sighed as she watched Safina get carried away on a stretcher.

For the time being, Magiluka and the others were finally done catching up on all the illicit activities the prince had set out to address but had ended up neglecting. Magiluka had been investigating to uncover as many issues as she could find, and finally, her work seemed to be at an end. Like with the present incident, the majority of cases saw their group reacting to a problem that had already gotten out of hand...

“All right, let’s return to the Academ— Eeek!” As Magiluka was about to turn

around, one last remaining insect monster skittered by her feet, making her screech and freeze up. However, as she followed it with her gaze, a foot mercilessly squished the thing. Said foot belonged to Fifi. Expressionless as ever, she didn't seem fazed at all by the whole ordeal, and she was instead more interested in the katana Safina had dropped in her fright.

"...Hmm. It's still lacking in firepower and durability. It's broken too. A weapon that doesn't exhaust the user's mana while using varied enchantments is useful, but this is far from complete. I should discuss it further with Deodora... In any case, Mary is impressive for coming up with this..."

Fifi left like nothing had happened, nodding to herself. Magiluka hurried after her, earnestly asking her to make sure she washed the sole of her shoe before entering the Academy.

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The next day, a letter was delivered to the trio of friends. It was sent by the prince, and it told the details of his and Mary's encounter with Count Ordile's son.

"Whoa, vampires... I thought they only existed in fairy tales," Sacher said.

"Lady Mary truly is impressive. Fighting the head of a vampire clan into submission... I wonder what the fight was like," Safina marveled.

"Apparently, His Highness wasn't there to see the fight. And Lady Mary, modest as she is, doesn't like to share stories of her victories in combat," Magiluka remarked as she read the letter aloud. "Also, sadly, Count Ordile's son doesn't know how to remove the circlet."

"So our only hope is the elf magus smith, Shelly," Sacher said pensively.

Magiluka's shoulders drooped in disappointment. "Yes. By the way, Miss Safina, it's your time to shine." She turned to face Safina, who hadn't participated in the conversation much thus far.

"Huh? Me?" Safina pointed at herself.

"Their next destination is the Ancient Forest, as it's the elven forest where Miss Shelly lives."

Hearing this, Safina tensed up nervously. The Ancient Forest was deeply connected to her family.

Although House Karshana was originally a knight family before it rose in rank to viscountcy—making them parvenus, so to speak—it received quite favorable treatment from the royal family. However, the other noble houses cooperated with House Karshana and gave tacit approval to their ties with the royal family, and this was thanks to the duty the Karshanas had been burdened with.

One would likely surmise what this duty was were they to learn where the Karshana domain lay. Their land required three days' travel from the capital to reach, and just beyond it lay a mountain range which nearly completely encircled the vast Ancient Forest. An opening between the mountains did exist, however...directly on the border of the Karshana domain, exposing a corner of the Ancient Forest directly to their land.

Much like how the Ordile domain had served as the kingdom's first line of defense against the Bloodrain clan, the Karshana viscountcy was responsible for fighting any monsters that emerged from the Ancient Forest. Unlike the Ordiles' more passive role, however, the Karshanas had been regularly enacting their duty to the kingdom from the moment the responsibility had landed at their feet. This was why Viscount Karshana placed great importance on military might, took an active role in passing down his house's sword techniques, and invested his resources into defense—he was dedicated to keeping monsters out of the Kingdom of Aldia.

As a daughter of House Karshana, Safina was not excluded from carrying this burden. In the past, the responsibility had been nothing but a source of stress and fear for her—and although she couldn't say she no longer had such feelings, her heart did dance at the chance to help Mary and her friends.

"This time... I'll be able to help everyone..."

Chapter 2: Academy Arc—The Prince's Gender Flip Incident Part 2

1. We've Returned

"What were you saying about this finishing up real quick?" I grumbled at the vampire sitting opposite me on the carriage. "Because it took you forever. We should have gone ahead and linked up on site..."

"Big sister, this oaf who's been loafing about day and night with the divine beast keeps picking on me! I'm scared!" Victorica said, clearly not afraid but not hesitating to take any chance to cling to Lady Rain.

I fell quiet and averted my gaze. *I mean, yeah, I didn't do much besides explore the castle, play with Lily, and bury my face in Snow's fur, but... Erm... Yeah, I do look lazy...*

None of the items in Victorica's vault had been useful for making my daily life any easier or inhibiting my power. Then, since Tutte was the only friend I'd had around and none of my friends were watching, I'd ended up relaxing too much and turning very lazy.

But I mean, I did keep up appearances when I was in front of Lady Rain... I think.

While I'd been lazing about, Victorica had finished her business, left the castle in Orbus's care, and joined our carriage as we rode back to the Academy. That brings us to the here and now, where I was butting heads with her in the carriage.

When we arrived at the Academy, Safina was the first to run over and greet me.

"Lady Mary, welcome back!"

"It's good to see you, Safina." I patted Safina on the head like she was an excitable puppy—I was healed by her presence.

Aaah, this energizes me in a different way than petting Lily does...

“Oh, my, now if this isn’t an adorable girl.” Victorica disembarked from the carriage while I was busy feeling blissful and peered into Safina’s face fixedly.

“Eeek!” Safina screeched upon noticing her and hid behind me.

“Hey, would you mind not just showing up like that and scaring my friend?” I said peevishly.

“Eh heh heh, the way she looks frightened is so cute...”

“Turn Und—” I started chanting.

“I-I didn’t mean to startle you!” She hurriedly apologized to Safina. “I’ll be careful in the future.”

“Your Hi—” Magiluka approached us, but then she recalled the queen’s warning. “I mean, Lady Rain. Welcome back.”

“Oh, Magiluka,” I said, relieved to see my reliable friend approach. Having to travel with Lady Rain all alone had been more nerve-racking than I’d expected.

“Well, Lady Mary?” Magiluka immediately looked at the vampire in the room. “Who’s this?”

Oh, good thing she reminded me.

“Oh, yes, that girl... I mean, that lady over there is the goldest, longest vampire, Victorica Bloodrain.”

“It’s oldest and strongest!” Victorica screeched at me, her fangs bared.

I figured I’d break the ice with a joke, but it seems it was unnecessary. Everyone just stared at me, the joke clearly going over their heads.

“Ah, yeah, that. I just got it a bit wrong because you keep forcing it into your introductions.”

“You didn’t get it ‘a bit’ wrong. You got it so wrong it doesn’t even make sense anymore! How can you not remember something that simple, you zombie brain!” Victorica approached me, her fangs bared angrily.

“Did you just call my brain rotten? Oh, you say some funny things, don’t you, heh heh heh...” I grabbed her face with an iron grip, the smile on my lips poorly

masking my icy stare.

“Ow, ow, oooow! F-Fine, I shouldn’t have said that! I take it back!” She tried to shake off my grip, but upon realizing she couldn’t, she started apologizing.

If she’d been Emilia, she’d have put up more of a fight, but Victorica seemed more faint of heart.

“Lady Mary, you’re gradually becoming more like Her Majesty and Lady Elizabeth, you know?” Sacher, who’d watched our exchange, gave his frank opinion.

His words dug into my heart ruthlessly. I let go of Victorica and hung my head. “I’m...being compared to those two terrifying women...?”

“Huh? Was what I said really all that offensive?” Sacher looked baffled.

“Um, Lady Mary, acting this shocked is rude to those two...” Magiluka murmured, looking at me disappointedly.

“Say, could you give me your name?” Victorica asked Safina sweetly while I was dispirited.

“U-Umm, I-I-I-I’m Safina Karshana...” Safina said in a jittery manner.

“My, Miss Safina, then. Hee hee, how adorable!” Victorica approached a cowering Safina, hyperventilating loudly. “Aaah, what am I to do with myself? I feel so sadistic seeing you, girl! Say, can I bite you?”

“Of course you can’t, you vampire floozy!” I grabbed her by the shoulder with a vicious smile.

“Um, can we move along? I’d like to get to work on our next course of action,” Lady Rain said with dry laughter.

Victorica and I instantly tensed up and looked at each other guiltily. We then swiftly finished introductions and moved to the headmaster’s office to make our report. Victorica stayed in another room, apparently uninterested in conversing with the headmaster, and instead she curiously examined the books stored nearby.

What a fidgety girl... I guess demons are just free-spirited like that.

“I see... Well, it wasn’t a wasted trip, but now you must go to the Ancient Forest...” the headmaster said, stroking his beard, a troubled look on his face.

“Is there a problem, sir?” Magiluka asked.

“Hmm... I’m not sure if I would call it a problem per se, but the Ancient Forest is uncharted territory for us. I’m unsure if we should send the prince to such a dangerous place...”

“We have Miss Victorica to guide us there, and she’s visited the elven forest in the past, so it should be fine,” Lady Rain said. “We also have Miss Safina to help us.”

Hearing this, Safina straightened out her back tensely and looked at the headmaster.

“Little Safina, eh... Yes, I suppose that’s for the best if you absolutely must enter the forest... Mm...”

Lady Rain nodded in response.

“Headmaster,” Magiluka chimed in, “we’ve resolved all the major issues at the academy, so I would like for Sacher and myself to join this time.”

Knowing how much trouble I caused by being alone this time around, I was relieved to hear this suggestion.

“Hmm, well, I suppose the Academy could approve it,” the headmaster said reluctantly. “However, we will also need the palace’s permission this time.”

Lady Rain nodded, agreeing to this condition.

The following day, Lady Rain went to ask for permission and didn’t show up in the Academy. Since I was the only one without any business to handle, I was sent to the castle to check on her. The maids guided me to the Queen’s room.

“We’ve brought Lady Mary over.” The maids bowed and then retreated, standing behind me.

Um, I didn’t come here to meet the queen, so I have to wonder, why did they take me right to her?

I watched the maids leave, took a deep breath, and turned my eyes to the

queen. Honestly, much like with Lady Elizabeth, dealing with her wore down my mental fortitude, so I didn't much like having to meet her face to face.

"Did you come here to see Rain?" the queen asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I replied tersely, feeling quite nervous. Snow wasn't here with me this time, and I was completely alone.

Ah, realizing that now only makes me even more nervous!

"Mm... Well, I'd rather not have people see this, but I suppose I could show you." The queen looked conflicted. "Follow me."

She walked off without waiting for my response, and I followed in a hurry. After a short walk, I could hear the sound of arguing from the room we were headed for. The queen ordered the soldiers guarding that room to open the door, and...

"No! No! I'm against it, no matter what!"

"Father, be reasonable! I have to return to my true form!"

What I saw in that room was a grown adult sobbing with his arms wrapped around the waist of a beautiful princess... In other words, His Majesty the King and Lady Rain. I was taken aback by how pitiful the king looked, but even more so than that, I was shocked by how upset Lady Rain was when she was usually so calm and amicable. Her tone even went back to being masculine.

"Your Majesty, what is this...?" I looked at the queen, confused.

"Yesterday, Rain came to ask for permission to go on her next journey. She had permission at first, but today, someone's decided to change their mind and throw a tantrum."

I didn't need to clarify who she'd meant here—it was clearly the old man on the floor bawling his eyes out.

"Wasn't it you who told me to abide by my duty as prince and future king and see the kingdom? And just yesterday, you agreed to let me go, saying it would be a learning experience!" Lady Rain said as she tried to shake off the king's grip and waved a slip of paper.

"Yes, I thought I would listen to my cute daughter's request, but looking at

you today changed my mind! I can't send my adorable, fair child on such a dangerous journey! There's no telling what lowlifes lurk outside the castle! I have to keep you out of the sight of such miscreants, Rain!"

Given how you hit on every pretty girl you see, I get the feeling this is a classic case of a pot calling the kettle black... I silently thought this scathing remark.

"Well, you never worried about that when I was a boy!"

"Now you're a pretty, perfect girl, so it's completely different!"

I could only laugh dryly as I watched this baffling exchange. Had I been asked to guess what had happened, I'd have supposed His Majesty had been busy with work or some...other business...and had given permission for Rain to go ahead without seeing her in person. However, once he saw her face to face this morning, he must have started fretting over his daughter's cuteness. Lady Rain, meanwhile, was outraged by the king treating her differently compared to when she was a boy.

"...It happened exactly the way you think it did," the queen whispered, which made me jolt and feel like my heart had just skipped a beat.

Drat, that was surprising... Can she read minds or something? I thought to myself as I turned around while the queen continued to watch those two. I took deep breaths to calm myself.

"Your Majesty, Mary is here to pick Rain up. This is a very important journey to return Rain to her original form. Won't you let her go?" The queen spoke to both of them with a soothing voice, like she was trying to calm a child.

This made the two of them look our way, and I straightened out my back and curtsied.

"Waaaah, sending my sweet daughter alone on such a dangerous... Oh, right! War! I can send the army to—" The king made this absurd suggestion like he'd just come up with a nice idea.

"Your Majesty. If you don't stop acting like that, I'll have to get mad." The queen beamed at him.

The king stiffened where he stood and fell silent, finally letting Lady Rain go.

Aaah, being all alone is so tiring... I want to go back to my friends... I sighed, trying to stay out of the royal family's sight.

As a digression, there was another incident in the palace, involving Victorica appearing out of nowhere. She'd stayed in a guest room, but she got caught by the queen as she was trying to sneak up on Lady Rain at night with improper intentions.

I was led to Victorica's room, where I found her wrapped up in sheets like she was a moth in a cocoon. I'd expected her to be more frustrated about this, but her eyes were glittering in bliss, like she was thinking "Oh, this isn't so bad." It reminded me of how a certain instructor acted when she was looking at the undead, so I left the sicko vampire behind and pretended I hadn't seen anything.

2. Another Carriage Ride

"Wait, why do I have to come along again?!" Snow said outside the carriage, looking in.

"I just figured out that not having you around makes a trip that much less peaceful," I opened the window and replied.

According to the guards that escorted our carriage last time, having Snow loiter outside the carriage was enough to keep bandits and the like away from us. It made sense that a giant snow leopard would scare them away. And so, to ensure our trip would be safe, and to make sure I wouldn't somehow expose myself because an incident happened, I had Snow come with us.

Our latest carriage ride was headed for the Ancient Forest. This time, we had Magiluka, Safina, and Sacher coming along too, which was a relief for me. On top of those three, we also had another unexpected addition to the roster in Fifi.

I don't know how she'd heard about it, but her reason for coming along was that she wanted to see elven magus smith techniques. Having someone else join us was reassuring, I did want to help her, and I honestly I had no reason to decline, so that was that. However, she was whispering something about

gaining new techniques to complete the weapon ideas I'd given her...

I don't really understand what you're on about, but just sell them as weapons made by you and not me, okay? No need to make my involvement known.

"Big sister, I baked us some cookies. Say aaah..." While I was lost with thought, Victorica picked up a cookie and held it out to Lady Rain.

"Erm, yes, thank you, Miss Victorica." Lady Rain tried to take the cookie, but the vampire girl pulled it away and brought it to up to Lady Rain's face.

"Now, big sister, say aaah..." Victorica seemed dead set on feeding her by hand.

This is supposed to be an intimate scene between too young ladies, but for some reason, one side seems like they're having some very indecent feelings about it. Maybe I'm imagining things... I thought, glaring at the vampire who radiated impure intentions.

"Wh-Why are you looking at me like that? Oh, I see... So *you* want this cookie. Heh, you greedy glutton— Ow, ow, oooow!" She tried to laugh it off, but I instantly grabbed her face hard.

***

"What a nice, uneventful trip... Last time we had a lot of commotion because of a certain someone, but this time, everything was peaceful." I got out of the carriage as we took a break and looked up to the sky, relishing the peace.

"Everything really is going well," Magiluka said as she walked behind me. "I just hope nothing— Guh."

I slapped a hand over her mouth, silencing her to stop her from finishing her thought.

"That was close," I said, gently removing my hand and admonishing her. "You never know—God could be listening, so you can't say anything too careless."

"Careless? All I was going to say is that I hope nothing bad ha— Mmg!" Magiluka objected,but I slapped my hand over her mouth again.

"Yes, that, that's what we call something careless. A jinx. Understood, Magiluka?" I brought my face close to hers, which prompted her to nod, her

cheeks rosy.

I freed Magiluka, relieved, and Sacher and Lady Rain approached us.

“Hey,” Sacher asked her. “Is it just me, or is that vampire girl, Victorica, treating me differently from everyone else?”

Hearing this, I realized Victorica wasn’t nearby, and looked around, spotting the vampire a short distance away...hissing menacingly. Needless to say, she was hissing at Sacher.

“If I had to guess, it’s because you’re at her ‘big sister’s’ side?” I suggested, casting a knowing glance at Lady Rain.

“‘Big sister?’” Sacher parroted.

Everyone present looked at Lady Rain.

“Well, being with a boy helps me calm down compared to being surrounded by women, you see...” Lady Rain said with an awkward smile.

I could understand how she felt, but anyone who didn’t know what her situation was really like would definitely get the wrong idea from that comment.

“Did you tell Victorica that, Lady Rain?” I asked.

“Yes, but she asked me about it while Sacher was around...” she replied with an adorable cock of the head.

Yep, she’s cute...

“Sir Sacher, I think Victorica has you marked as a rival. She’ll likely challenge you over Lady Rain soon enough,” I said gravely, half in jest and half trying to scare him.

“For real?!” Sacher reacted excitedly. “I don’t really get why she’d do that, but being a vampire’s rival sounds awesome! How strong is she, by the way? She looks strong, but you fought her, right?”

“I don’t know, was she strong? She calls herself the oldest, strongest vampire, so if I had to guess...” I began to muse, slightly peeved.

I was displeased that Sacher hadn’t reacted as I’d expected, but I reasoned

that this was just what Sacher was like. Honestly, I couldn't properly gauge whether Victorica was strong or not, since I was unreasonably strong myself...

"All right, let's try a mock battle to see how good she is," Sacher suggested. "Yeah, that sounds good! Victoricaaa!"

Whoa, what a brainless brute. Scary.

"Um, Lady Mary...?" Safina, who had watched us wordlessly so far, approached me bashfully.

"Yes, Safina?"

"Since we're away from the Capital and the Academy, do we really have to pretend like Lady Rain is a girl?"

That's true, now that she mentions it. But...

"Miss Safina, that's careless." Magiluka instantly rejected the idea.

"Agreed." Lady Rain nodded. "There's no telling whether mother is having us watched during this trip. Some of my attendants here are under mother's employ. Lady Mary likely noticed this, which was why she treated me as a girl during the previous trip."

"Really?! That's impressive, Lady Mary!" Safina looked at me with glittering eyes.

I broke into a cold sweat, since this was very much something I hadn't thought of. I couldn't look Safina in the eye.

"Th-That's not true," I muttered, wanting to correct Safina's misunderstanding. "Even I..."

"Ooh, stop it, you irritating oaf! I have no intention of messing about with a man!" I heard Victorica holler.

"What, you're no good at swordplay? Wanna wrestle instead?" Sacher asked.

"Aren't you listening to me?!"

"Aha ha ha, no need to be shy!"

"I am not being shy! Stay away from me! I'll kick you away!"

“Oh, you’re up for it?! Let’s go!”

They absolutely weren’t on the same page as me, but our conversation came to a close as we became transfixed by Sacher and Victorica’s awkward exchange. There was no longer an opportunity to correct their misunderstanding. I tried my best to smile through the pain.

“...Uh, what’s wrong, Lady Mary?” Fifi, who was asleep in the carriage, stifled a yawn. “Your eyes are blank, like a dead fish.”

“It’s nothing...” I restrained my defeated emotions and answered Fifi’s rather unpleasant metaphor with a strained smile.

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Our journey continued, and it went by almost frighteningly smoothly. We crossed other territories and were on the verge of entering the Karshana domain. According to Safina, the road ahead led to a village that separated the forest from her family’s domain, with a fortress set between them.

The safest way into the Ancient Forest would be through that fortress, but doing that required going through a lot of formalities. However, this time, Safina’s status as the governor’s daughter allowed us to get in essentially for free.

“Mary, why are you riding on my back instead of sitting in the carriage?” Snow’s voice cut into my thoughts.

“The carriage is full of Victorica’s saccharine aura. It’s giving me heartburn,” I replied.

“And you’re sure you shouldn’t be in there? What if that vampire forces herself on the prince?”

“...I-It’ll be fine. She’s not that dumb...I think. Besides, Lily’s there, and I left Magiluka there too.”

But even I had to ask myself if they’d be able to handle things if something happened. Everything was fine so far, though, so I decided not to think about it too hard.

“The town is coming into view, Lady Mary,” Tutte said, riding behind me on

Snow's back.

I looked ahead. The town was still a ways off, but even from afar, I could make out its large, solid walls. Our schedule was to spend the night there and pass through the fort tomorrow, after which Victorica would guide us to the elven village.

Elves, huh? I'm so curious to see them...

I recalled the things I'd heard about elves in my past life, and I felt my heart fill up with expectation. With Safina's help, our inspection at the gates ended quickly, and we entered the town.

"So, this is Safina's homeland," I mused as I looked around the town, still riding Snow's back.

I didn't like the idea of standing out like this, but having Snow walk around alone would startle the townsfolk, so having me ride on her back got across that she wasn't dangerous. Unlike other domains, monster attacks were frequent here, so everyone was probably wary about her appearance.

Still... Ugh, everyone's starting. Maybe I shouldn't be riding her like this...

Unlike when I was inside the carriage, I was in plain sight of the passing by civilians. There were even people leaning out their windows to stare at us.

"I get the feeling people are staring at us because of you, Mary," Snow tried to pin the blame on me.

"They're staring at you, not at me!" I rained little blows on Snow's catlike head, objecting.

"Um, Lady Mary, I see people are worshipping us. Maybe I should climb off?" Tutte said, likely feeling just as uncomfortable as I was.

"Hey, don't leave me all alone here... Wait, worshipping?" I tried to stop her from leaving, but then I realized she'd said something very ominous.

"I would assume it's because they realize Lady Snow is a divine beast and you're riding atop her back." Tutte said this like it was all very obvious.

"Uh, can you run that by me again? The first half made sense, the second half, not so much," I said, refusing to understand.

“Yes, I suppose you yourself would not realize how majestic you look right now.”

“Why do you keep using words like that? I’m just your average, run-of-the-mill duke’s daughter.”

“Forget that nonsense, Mary.” Snow cut into my words.

“What nonsense?!” I snapped at her and rained more blows on her triangular, feline head.

“I was just thinking that this town has an awful lot of armed soldiers, is all.”

I looked around, and she was right. I hadn’t paid it much attention until Snow pointed it out, but there really were a lot of soldiers in this town compared to towns in other domains. I had Snow move closer to the carriage and called Safina over to the window.

“Yes, Lady Mary?” Safina said.

“Say, Safina, do your domain’s towns always have this many soldiers garrisoned?” I asked.

“...No, usually we don’t have this many soldiers here,” she replied, looking around.

“You say ‘usually’... So, are there situations where this can happen?”

“Yes... When it’s very likely monsters might rush out of the forest, we increase the alert level...” Safina said, then she went pale in realization and tapered off.

I looked up to the sky in concern. Maybe this journey wouldn’t be all that uneventful after all.

3. To the Karshana Domain

“Safinaaaa!”

“M-Mother!”

When we arrived at the Karshana estate, the doors swung open, and a woman ran over to us. Safina looked totally surprised as she turned to face her mother.

She looked less like a noble’s spouse and more like a knight. She wasn’t clad in a dress, but rather a knight’s garb, and she was tall with a toned physique. Her hair was just like Safina’s, chestnut with frizzy ends.

We could only watch on in stunned silence as this large woman charged toward Safina, who had only just scampered out of the carriage like a small animal.

“Oh, Safina, you’ve grown so much since I last saw you! We’ve heard the tales of your exploits even from all the way out here! You really are my pride and joy!” She completely enveloped Safina in a tight hug, pouring all her affection into a full-power squeeze.

“M-Maffer...!” Safina called out to her mother, her voice muffled. You might think she was choking up from this touching reunion...but no, she was just choking, period.

“U-Umm, excuse me. I hate to interject, but...I think you might be suffocating Safina. Could you please relax your grip a little?” I asked carefully, having realized this was Safina’s mother.

“Hm? Oh, pardon! I was just so happy to see her...” The woman beamed our way and freed Safina.

Safina’s mother was Lucille Karshana, a former knight. While she was on active duty, she’d performed just as well as her male peers—no other woman knight had slain as many monsters as her in the kingdom’s history, and she held a commanding lead in that statistic.

During one monster-slaying excursion, she’d met Safina’s father and fallen

head over heels for him. The current Lord Karshana was a stern, taciturn man, and it's said that Lucille was the one to actively pursue the relationship.

Hmm... How did such a bold woman get a daughter as skittish as Safina? Actually, maybe it's because *she's like this Safina turned out the way she did...*

Let's put aside my investigation into the circumstances of Safina's home life. Presently, we'd been invited to a guest room, where we all introduced ourselves and passed the time calmly.

"By the way, Viscountess Karshana, I noticed a great many armed soldiers patrolling the town. Is something the matter?" Lady Rain asked, bringing up the matter we'd discussed earlier.

"Um... Would Lady Rain be the right way to refer to you?" Lucille asked.

"Yes, please. Otherwise, the queen might have us punished," Magiluka replied frankly.

"Yes, that does sound like something the queen might do..." Lucille said uncomfortably. "As for your question...a few days ago, an apothecary escorted by an adventurer party went out to the forest to gather medicinal herbs, and they were attacked by monsters. That in and of itself isn't usually a problem. Monster attacks are common around these parts."

Lucille assured us the party had returned from the woods with only light injuries, but their story *had* included one disturbing detail. The monsters that had attacked them were, apparently, Giant Rats. Giant Rats looked just like normal rats, but they were around the size of a large dog, and they mostly infested dank, narrow, dark places like underground passages or caves—yet the party ran into four such Giant Rats in the forest.

Giant Rats weren't very intelligent and were quite cowardly, and they weren't prone to aggression. For the people of the Karshana domain, familiar as they were with monsters, the adventurers' report was quite baffling. In light of his people's concerns over the matter, Lord Karshana mobilized his troops, sending them to the nearby fort to investigate the forest.

"But that said, it's still just a bunch of Giant Rats," Lucille continued. "There's no need to be so wary about them, but my husband is ever the worrywart.

That’s part of what makes him so cute and lovely though...”

She finished that sentence while gushing over her husband, which we could only respond to with an awkward smile.

“Maybe we should wait before we head for the elven village?” I asked Lady Rain once we finished hearing Lucille’s story.

She closed her eyes pensively for a few seconds before responding.

“No. We’ll head for the elven village as scheduled. If we dawdle too much, Ms. Shelley could wander off, vagabond that she is.”

Sensing Lady Rain’s firm will, we all nodded in agreement. The vampire of the group let out a squeal of “Big sister, you’re so lovely!” with glittering eyes, but I ignored her.

That night, I stayed at the Karshana estate, but I couldn’t sleep because I was so excited thinking about how tomorrow we’d enter the Ancient Forest and meet the elves, so I left the room to take a walk, hoping it would help make me sleepy. Then, while I was on my stroll, I noticed a girl standing in the estate’s lawn, her profile illuminated by the moonlight.

“Safina?”

She gripped her katana with perfect concentration as she wholeheartedly swung it. The accuracy of that swing greatly exceeded the beautiful swordsmanship I’d seen her master as a first year student.

“Unyielding swordsmanship.”

I heard a voice from the opposite side of the garden, so I decided to get quiet and hold off on my attempt to call out to her.

“F-Father...”

Safina sheathed her sword and hurriedly turned to face her father, looking tense. Safina’s father, Lord Karshana, was very different from my father, Ferdid. Lord Karshana was tall and slender, but even over his clothes, I could see he was very toned and muscular—pretty macho, all things considered, but still slender. His narrow jade eyes carried a sharp glint, accentuating his tense, stern

facial features.

So ,that's Safina's father... He looks very strict. I'm sure I'd have gotten scared and burst into tears if I'd met him when I was little.

"Did you develop that swordsmanship style?" he asked.

"N-No... Lady Mary...introduced it to me..."

"And what about your grades in the tournament, and all the incidents you helped resolve?"

"That was... Because I had everyone to help me. On my own, I..."

Safina trembled like he was scolding her, and she hung her head as she answered his questions. I watched on in silence. It seemed Safina didn't speak unless spoken to when it came to her father—or, perhaps, it wasn't that she simply *didn't*, it was more like she *couldn't* bring herself to say anything to him.

After a moment's silence, Lord Karshana spoke to her again. "I'm sorry."

Safina looked up at him in surprise, taken aback by the apology.

"I mean the matter of your fiancée. I ignored his personality and only considered his skills. I realize I put you through a difficult experience."

"N-No... Lady Mary and the others were there to help me through it, so..." Safina closed her eyes, recalling something, and hung her head.

Another brief silence hung over the two. "Are you enjoying your time at the Academy, Safina?" Lord Karshana said at last.

"Yes." This time, Safina's answer came instantly and clearly, and she looked her father straight in the face...though she soon chickened out and hung her head again.

"I see... That's very good." Lord Karshana whispered, but this time, the harsh coldness of his voice gave way to something warm and relieved.

Safina seemed to have noticed it too, considering she raised her head and looked up at him...but Lord Karshana had already turned around and left.

I simply stayed behind the pillar I'd been hiding behind, feeling like stepping out would have been inappropriate of me.

So, that's Safina's father... I'd had a bad impression of him when I heard about him in our first year, but now he seems more to me like a dad who cares a lot for his daughter but can't express it. That's a relief...

I leaned against the pillar and looked up.

Parents, huh? Maybe I should talk to my parents once this incident is all over. I could give father a shoulder rub... Wait, no, I should practice first so I don't end up crushing his shoulders instead.

I giggled from firing myself up, then I returned to my room to prepare for tomorrow.

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The next day, we gave our regards to Lord Karshana and went shopping in preparation for our trip. We could take a carriage to the fort, but the walk through the forest to the village would have to be by foot, so we'd need a change of clothes.

"All right! I've always been meaning to get one of these... An adventurer's backpack!" I said excitedly.

"What's that, if I may ask?" Magiluka interjected. We were at a store in town that sold clothes and equipment.

"For starters, you're a sorcerer, Magiluka, so you should look the part." I made a gesture of moving something aside, effectively ignoring Magiluka's quip. "What do they call those things again? Those long-rimmed, pointy hats... Anyway, you'll need one of those, and a robe too. That's a must."

"Oh, then I should look like a knight!" Sacher raised his hand expectantly, apparently catching onto my idea.

"Since we're an adventurer party, you're not going for 'knight' exactly so much as 'warrior.' We'll have you use a one-handed sword and shield and wear leather armor. You'll look like the perfect adventurer!"

"Aww, but I want full body armor like you wore that one time, Lady Mary!"

"You do realize you'll get exhausted in no time if you walk through the forest in full armor, yes?" Magiluka pointed out calmly.

“Hmm, for Safina... You have a katana, so I guess you’ll be a samurai. But I can’t exactly find you a kimono... Oh, but since you’re quick, a ninja could work too! But I can’t find you a ninja outfit either...”

“H-Huh? ‘Samurai’? ‘Kimono’? ‘N-Ninja’? What’re those?” Safina tilted her head in confusion as she failed to follow what I was saying.

Ugh, I’m sure there’s an Oriental society somewhere in this world! I wish they’d share their culture with our country already!

“Wouldn’t Miss Safina count as a warrior, too?” Magiluka asked.

“No! I forbid it!” I insisted gravely. “We can’t have Safina walking around in bikini armor!”

“Wh-What is this ‘bikini armor’ you speak of?!” Magiluka asked, looking overwhelmed by my anger.

“Well, bikini armor is woman-exclusive equipment that looks like this...” Although it was a bit impolite, I kneeled on the ground and drew the rough shape of the armor on the soil. Both Safina and Magiluka went red in the face imagining the actual product.

“I-I-I-I can’t wear something like...that! I’d die from embarrassment!” Safina stuck out both arms and waved them in denial. She was red up to her ears—her face looked so hot that I thought she might start melting.

“To begin with, this armor offers no protection! I don’t think anything like this actually exists,” Magiluka argued, disgusted.

“...Hmm, hmm. Ah, I see. Bikini armor... Fascinating.” Our resident fox-eared magus smith hummed with interest. “I should ask Deodora to make a set the next time I see her. Maximizing the defensive power of a getup like this should put my magus smith abilities to the test.”

Magiluka went very pale and tried to steer the conversation away from the possibility of Fifi acting on this idea. “A-A-Anyway, what about you, Lady Mary? Will you dress like a sorcerer, same as me? Or as a warrior?”

I mulled it over. “Hmm, if I had to pick, I’d say a class that uses both swords and sorcery.”

“Oh, you mean like a certain legendary magic knight?” Magiluka said, uttering a very dangerous word.

“Uh, no, not that. Definitely not that. Absolutely not that.”

I did not *mean “magic knight” as in the Argent Knight or a hero or anything like that. Ugh, have I already put one foot in the grave on this one?*

“Um, my class would be, umm... Villager!” I said, coming up with the most inconspicuous class imaginable in a RPG.

“That doesn’t count as an adventurer.” Magiluka ruthlessly rejected my idea at the most fundamental level.

“Lady Mary, you can use divine magic, so can’t you be a priest or a cleric?” Sacher asked.

“Hmm, a priest... I don’t have a good impression of the clergy after what happened in Relirex.”

Picking “priest” wouldn’t draw nearly as much attention as “magic knight,” but after what’d happened in the Academy Festival and in the Relirex Kingdom, my favorability rating for the Papacy had bottomed out, and I felt uncomfortable being given a class related to them.

“Mweh heh heh...” Victorica, who was holding a parasol to block off the sun, flashed a knowing smile. “What a foolish discussion this is. You are already called the Argent Holy Woman, so your class ought to be Holy Woman!”

“Ooooh, right!” everyone exclaimed, and Magiluka plopped her fist in her palm like she was perfectly satisfied by the suggestion.

Incidentally, while vampires were supposedly weak to sunlight, Victorica was somehow capable of walking under it with just a parasol. When sunlight did hit her directly, she just yelped out “Ow!” and got a bit sunburnt, but her vampiric healing powers would soon heal it. She really was a powerful little vampire, it seemed.

“I’m not gonna do that! It’d be embarrassing dressing like that! Wait, what does a holy woman even wear?!” I vehemently objected.

“Huh.” Sacher paused. “What *does* a holy woman wear?”

“Well, the fairy tales say that it’s usually villager girls who become holy women,” Magiluka replied.

“So, a villager works after all?” I proposed, still feeling a bit negative about the whole thing.

“What class and outfit should *I* wear, by the way?” Lady Rain, who’d been watching over our exchange with warm eyes so far, changed the subject, perhaps sensing my discomfort.

Everyone’s eyes turned to me for some reason. “Um... I guess you’d be...a princess?” I mused, making up a mysterious RPG class on the spot.

“‘Princess’ is a class?” Lady Rain asked, surprised. “But walking around the forest in a dress sounds very uncomfortable. Can’t I have a class that dresses a little more ligh—”

“What are you saying, Lady Rain? Showing off your noble pedigree no matter the situation is a princess’s job!” I said, getting carried away. “That’s what being royalty is all about! You know what fairy tales are like! Even when a princess is captive or on the run, she’s always in a gorgeous dress, right? It’s like that!”

“Erm... Is that how it works?” Lady Rain asked in a cold sweat, a bit overwhelmed by my fervent explanation.

An hour or so later, we’d all finished dressing, wearing what we pleased.

“What do you think, Tutte? We match!”

I couldn’t have poor Tutte walking around in a maid’s uniform this time, so I had her wear an outfit similar to mine.

“I think this might be the first time I’ve seen you wearing something that isn’t a maid uniform, Tutte,” Safina remarked, looking at Tutte closely. “It’s a nice change of pace. You look cute.”

“D-Do you think so...?” Tutte fidgeted under Safina’s gaze and grabbed the hem of her skirt.

“We look like sisters standing side by side like this, right?!” I locked arms with Tutte and showed us off to Safina.

“...No, you look more like a noble lady and her attendant dressing up like village girls,” Fifi offered frankly and mercilessly. “Even with different clothes, you can’t hide your relationship.”

I fell on my hands and knees and hung my head.

“A-Are you all right, Lady Mary?” Tutte tried to nurse me out of my melancholy.

However, Fifi’s scathing appraisal left me determined to rebel. “No, Tutte, don’t call me ‘Lady.’ That makes you sound like my attendant. Just call me Mary, and I’ll call you ‘big sister’!”

“Huuuh?!” Tutte looked stunned and shook her head in opposition. “I can’t! That would be too impudent of me!”

“Tutte, please. Just for now! Okay, try it. One, two...!” I grabbed Tutte’s hands and begged her.

“M-M-Ma... L-Lady Mary.”

“No ‘Lady’! Okay, one more time. One, two...”

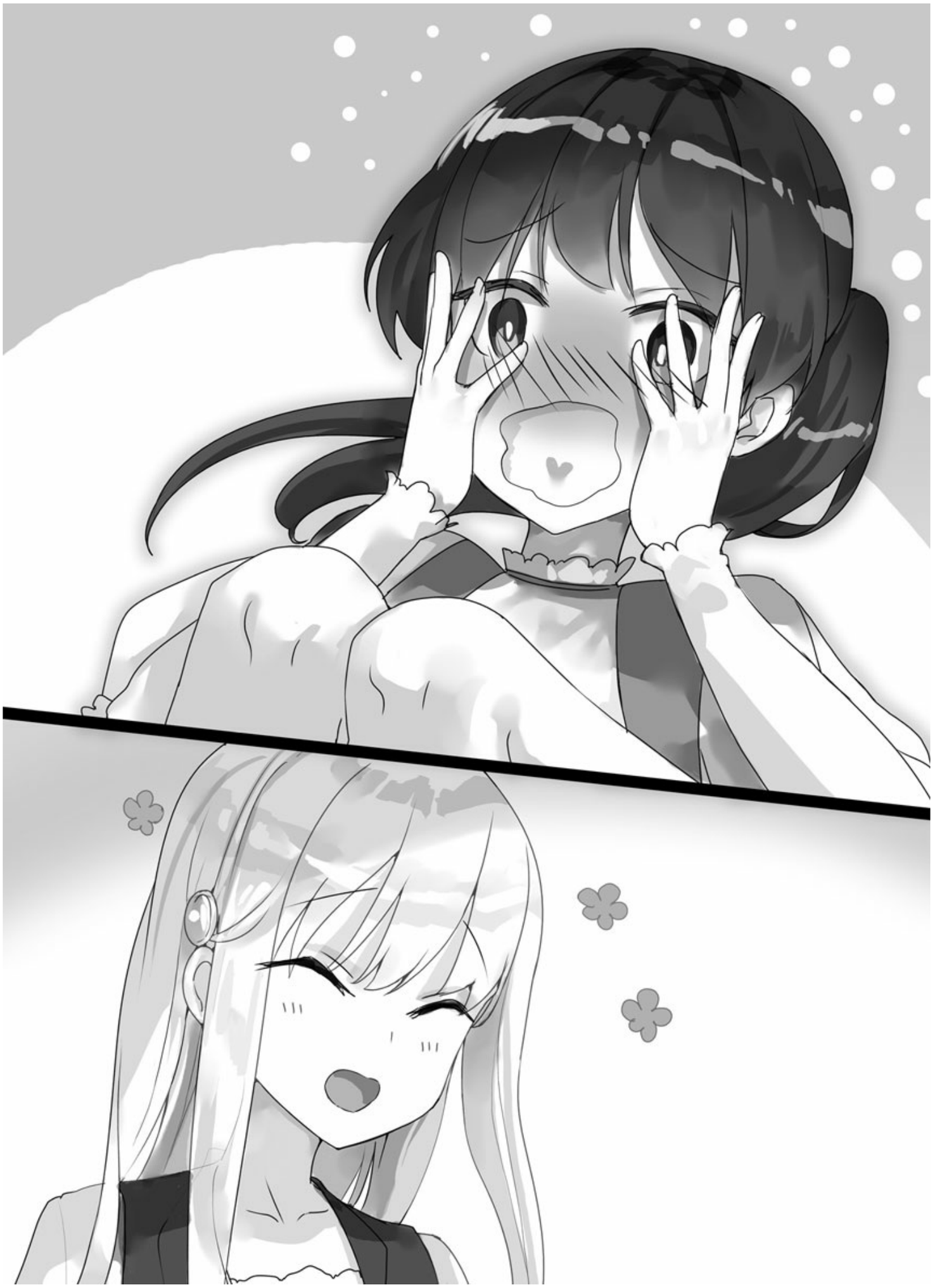
“M-Mary...” Tutte finally managed to say it as I looked at her with expectant eyes.

“Yeees? What is it, big sister? ♪” I answered with a satisfied grin.

Tutte looked away from me, covered her face with both hands, and sat down, trembling. She was red up to her ears.

“I-I can’t! I just can’t, Lady Mary! Please spare me from this! I might die! You saying that just packs too much power. I’m gushing to death here!”

Safina nodded in a “I know how you feel” sort of way while patting Tutte on the back encouragingly.



Aww, I wouldn't mind Tutte being my big sister though... I guess there's no getting over class differences that easily. It's a shame, though. As Tutte and Safina talked to each other, reaching some kind of mutual understanding, I came to my own conclusions, blissfully unaware that I was thinking in the opposite direction from them...

"What are you two doing?" Magiluka approached us, apparently having finished changing into her outfit. She was fixing her hat.

As we all gathered together, Fifi scrutinized our makeshift party. "...These three make sense since they're a swordswoman, warrior, and sorcerer. But the four of *you* look like you're underestimating the dangers of adventuring."

The four people Fifi was speaking about were me, Tutte, Lady Rain, and Victorica, who looked either like unarmed villagers or rich ladies in expensive dresses. Indeed, if someone saw us heading into the forest, they'd probably step in to stop us.

"Heh heh heh... Do not let appearances mislead you." Victorica puffed up her chest proudly. "Our quartet is made up of a vampire, a holy woman, her maid, and a princess."

"...So what? That doesn't mean you have the skills to travel and adventure." Fifi said expressionlessly, cutting down Victorica with her verbal blade.

"Big sister, this stone-faced fox lady is being mean to me!" Victorica clung to Lady Rain's arm with tearful eyes, like a child who'd just been scolded. Lady Rain patted her on the head.

"Anyway! Let's make our way to the elven forest! Everyone, let's gooo!" I said while pumping my fist, trying to rouse everyone up.

4. Encounter in the Forest

"Hmm, I have mixed feelings about this. I'd be excited to have a pretty boy riding on my back...it'd be more dashing that way...but instead, all I have is girls riding me."

After we reached the fort, got off the carriage, and began heading for the

forest, Snow made this silly complaint. At present, Lady Rain was riding on Snow's back, with Lily resting on Lady Rain's lap. Lady Rain was initially opposed to the idea of being the only one riding the divine beast, but Magiluka convinced her that if something happened, she should be able to escape right away. With this, Lady Rain felt driven to consent.

Hmm, with how she's dressed and with Lily on her lap, she really looks like some kind of golden maiden loved by divine beasts. Much more picturesque than I ever was, if you ask me!

"Is Lady Snow saying something, Miss Mary?" Lady Rain said, noticing the glare I was directing at the leopard. "Should I get off after all—"

"Oh, no, she just said she's very excited to have you ride on her back. This sicko divine bea—" I said, looking up at Lady Rain.

"Heeey, that's slander! I did say I'd be excited, but don't call me a sicko! Take that back!" Snow shoved her snout toward me and rubbed it against me, getting in the way of my explanation.

"Hey, cut it out, Snow! That tickles! F-Fine, I'm sorry, what I said earlier wasn't accurate. What she said was that she's a sicko who gets off to having you ride her like a hor—"

"That just sounds worse!" Snow started play-biting my head.

Heh, I'm not the kind of lady who'd take damage from that! However, everyone was watching this unfold in abject horror, so I had to apologize and get her to stop.

"Why are you playing around, Argent Holy Woman? You're being too laid-back. Isn't that right, big sister?" Victorica said, floating next to Lady Rain with her parasol open seeking approval of her opinion.

I wasn't sure if I should be impressed with this display of the power of the self-proclaimed oldest and strongest vampire or just assume she was showing off. Lily, who was resting on Lady Rain's lap, raised her head and hissed at her. Victorica bared her fangs and hissed back.

Lily was apparently protective of her favorite spot on Lady Rain's lap and hated the idea of Victorica getting her way. Victorica, on her end, wanted to

cling to Lady Rain, but Lily was clearly getting in the way of that. And so, the two started hissing away at each other.

“Okay, you immature vampire, stop trying to scare the child, would you? And don’t call me ‘Argent Holy Woman.’ Right now, I’m Mary Regalia, the villager,” I declared proudly.

“Umm, Lady Mary, I think you can’t be considered a villager the moment you call yourself ‘Regalia,’” Tutte, who was dressed similarly to me, whispered to my ears, which did serve to silence me.

“Everyone, the forest is coming into view,” Safina, who was leading our group, informed us.

“Oh,wow... Even from here I can see how vast it is!” Sacher exclaimed enthusiastically.

And indeed, we could see a great greenwood spreading out in the horizon. If this was only part of the Ancient Forest, the entire area must have been immeasurably vast. I stopped in my tracks, momentarily overwhelmed by the scale of the place.

Our escorts so far were to set up camp here and serve as logistical support for our exploration. According to Victorica, many among the elves didn’t view humans favorably, and storming into their territory in large numbers could spark needless conflict. I was sure we wouldn’t be in any major danger regardless since we had both a divine beast and a vampire on our side. Nonetheless, since no one was keen on starting conflict, the grown-ups reluctantly agreed to back off.

“We’ll be relying on you, Miss Victorica. Please guide us carefully,” Lady Rain said.

“Yes, big sister. On my name, Victorica Bloodrain, I shall guide you— O-Ow, it’s hot!” Victorica tried to put her hands on her waist proudly, but it made her accidentally lower her parasol and get a faceful of sunlight.

Not gonna lie, I’m starting to worry about this. Can she actually guide us properly?

Despite my concerns, our haphazard party began to advance into the forest. Foliage and branches blocked off most of the sunlight, with only small rays of light filtering in through the curtain of greenery. With all the tall trees around us, I easily lost sight of which direction we were going.

So, this is the Ancient Forest... I can see why they don't let amateurs travel here.

I looked up at the towering trees as we walked, but I made sure to not lose sight of everyone. But then, I saw Safina cut through the trees and leaves to clear the way for us. I think she might have left a landmark as well.

"You look used to this, Safina," I noted. Normally, I'd have expected her to be the most jittery of our bunch in a place like this.

"Well, the Karshana domain treats the forest as a defensive front, but we also rely on many of the forest's blessings. I've been taken to explore the forest many times—albeit reluctantly..." Safina punctuated her explanation with dry laughter. "But right now, I can use this knowledge to help everyone, so I'm happy. Ehe heh heh."

The way Safina giggled bashfully and fidgeted a little was truly adorable.

"Aaah, goodness, how cute!" Victorica, who was leading the pack, suddenly drew close to Safina with a blush on her cheeks. "Hey, can I take a bite? Just a little one. Come now, it'll be quick."

"Would you stop that, you perverted vampire?! Just show us the way!" I hugged Safina so as to shield her from Victorica and shooed her away.

"Heh heh heh. A mere villager thinks she can order the oldest, strongest vampire, Victorica Bloodrain, around?! How— Ow! It burns!"

Seeing her act all high and mighty around me ticked me off, so I tilted her parasol up a little. Since she'd just stepped into a bit of sunlight filtering onto the forest floor, she started rolling away in pain.

"...Your nonsense aside..." Fifi began expressionlessly.

"Hold your horses! Don't call it nonsense!" Victorica stopped rolling around and protested.

Fifi didn't care and continued looking around, her expression as indiscernible as ever. "...There's something approaching us," she said with a voice both flat and devoid of any urgency.

Her beastman hearing was paying off. We all looked around carefully.

"Monsters in such a shallow part of the forest? Normally, that wouldn't happen..." Safina whispered cautiously.

"What do we do?" I asked. "It could just be an animal. Maybe we should let it pass by."

"No, it smells like monsters. And we're surrounded, at that," Snow said alertly, not needing to see what we were up against to tell it was there. Lily too was hissing on Lady Rain's lap.

"We're surrounded, and these are monsters. Everyone, look sharp!" I informed the others of what Snow had said.

"Heh heh heh. No matter how many measly monsters might gang up on us, they are no match for the likes of me, Victorica Bloodrain—" Victorica stepped up to the plate confidently, twirling her parasol.

But then, something in the underbrush shook and pounced at her!

"Interrupting someone while they're speaking is rude." Victorica swept the monster away with a casual backhand slap. The slap sent the monster flying back at intense speed, and it hit a tree trunk. It was hard to get over how much of a silly attention-seeker Victorica was, but I had to be impressed with her strength.

"It's a giant rat." Safina was the first to recognize the monster that had just gotten counterattacked. "Everyone, be careful."

"A giant rat, huh? That'll be easy enough. Come at me! Provoke!" Sacher used some kind of spell meant to focus the attention of others on him.

I was surprised, since I'd never known he'd learned this kind of spell, but as I looked on, three giant rats swarmed him at once.

"Earth Wall!" Magiluka chanted, timing the spell perfectly so a wall of soil surged up and stood between Sacher and the rats, causing one of them to run

into it.

“Draw!” Safina drew her katana and attacked a second rat.

“Leave the last one to me!” Sacher drew his own sword and defeated the third rat.

After that, Sacher walked up to the giant rat that’d hit the wall and finished it off. The whole affair was a swift, impressive, and overall experienced display of teamwork.

“That said...” I muttered.

I’d been impressed by the whole thing since they’d all looked cool like adventurers from anime, but the fact Sacher’s Provoke spell had drawn all the enemies to him and had kept every single one of them away from me left me feeling a bit anxious.

Can that spell really draw the enemy’s attention that perfectly? Because I think I saw a giant rat skitter away...

“L-Lady Rain, stay on Snow’s back. I think the monsters are scared of Snow and don’t want to come near her. Miss Fifi, you too.” With that warning, I drew closer to Snow as well, but for some reason, Fifi drew closer to me instead.

“No, if I had to say, they’re scared of you, Mary,” Snow commented, bluntly airing my sneaking suspicion.

I brought a finger to my lips in a hushing gesture and silenced her. And while I was doing this, the battle ended with a total victory for our side.

“In any case, you’ve all gotten much stronger since the last time I saw you. You look very...experienced,” Rain said, coming to the same conclusion as me.

“...Well, while you two were away, we had to deal with a giant rat and carapace bug infestation in the Academy,” Magiluka said with a very tired, distant look.

What is she thinking back on, exactly?

Sacher and Safina nodded sagely.

Seriously, our Academy really is too hands off. It gets so chaotic that I’m

surprised the place doesn't fall apart... Well, I guess it's on the brink of that happening at all times.

"Now, that's enough playtime. Let's make for the village." Victorica dismissed that poor excuse for a battle as a game and, after checking that the back of her hand was clean, walked off.

We all followed, but Safina alone lingered, looking at the giant rats with a troubled expression.

"What's wrong, Safina?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. I just thought these giant rats are smaller and thinner than the ones we saw in the Academy," she replied pensively. "They must have been very weak and emaciated, but since they attacked while you're here, Lady Mary, they must have been very hungry."

I zeroed in on that last comment she made and corrected her. "Safina, you mean because Snow and Victorica were here, not me. That's a very important distinction. Don't get it wrong."

"Huh? But Lady Mary, you've fought and beat both of them." Safina looked baffled.

"Look, you've got it wrong, okay? I didn't fight either of them, we just hashed things out and became friends. Please refrain from spreading false information!"

I did fight Snow with Safina by my side, but back then she'd already submitted —or rather, she'd had no desire to fight. As for Victorica, I didn't recall ever actually fighting her. I'd just cast a little divine magic on her and then banged on the wall beside her.

Yeah, that wasn't a fight. I did not fight her!

"...The truly strong win without fighting," Fifi muttered as she passed us by.

"True..." Safina said, looking convinced. I wasn't sure if it was my explanation or Fifi's that did the trick, but then Safina walked off and to join the rest of the group.

"W-Wait, Safina! What did you agree with just now?! Safina, Safina!" I took

off after her.

After that, we continued walking through the forest without running into any danger. The view around us remained the same now matter how deep we went, making it hard to tell if we were getting closer to the village.

“Say, Victorica, how much longer until we get to the village?” I asked.

“We’re nearly there,” she replied without sparing a glance my way.

I didn’t know what she was basing that statement on, but she looked like she knew where she was going.

But then...

“Ah...!”

...a strange feeling ran through me.

What was that? It felt like we just passed through some invisible wall, or, like...a membrane.

“Mweh heh heh. So you noticed. Truly, you are worthy of being my rival!” Victorica, who was walking ahead of me, noticed me looking around in confusion. “The reason the elven forest remains undiscovered is because it’s protected by a barrier that prevents detection by humans—a barrier that we just passed through.”

“Wait, but if it repels people, wouldn’t it work on you?” I asked.

“Heh heh heh. What a foolish question.” Victorica twirled her parasol casually. “This barrier is not *nearly* powerful enough for such a feat. In fact, for me, the mana of the barrier was a useful means by which to discover the village...but even if it *were* a more powerful barrier, it would do nothing to stand in the way of the oldest, strongest vampire, Victorica Bloodrain!”

She puffed up her meager chest proudly and glanced over to Lady Rain, no doubt fishing for praise and compliments.

“Impressive, Miss Victorica. We were right to depend on you,” Lady Rain said, aptly picking the words that would please the vampire the most.

“Aaah, big sister!” Victorica beamed, her eyes aglitter, and made to lunge at Lady Rain for a hug...

“Ah, grrr!”

...but Lily noticed her approach and hissed at her from atop Lady Rain’s lap, to which Victorica hissed back.

“Listen, you immature vampire, how long are you going to keep up your hissing contest with the literal baby?” I sighed.

“By the way, Mary,” Snow chimed in.

“Yes, Snow?”

“Around when the barrier temporarily lost its effect, someone was approaching in our direction. They’re hiding atop the trees. They’re not alone either. Is this a welcoming party?”

I froze up. *When the barrier temporarily lost its effect? Wait, did my skill nullify it? I mean, it’s probably my fault, but since it was only temporary, it’s not broken, is it? But if it was a welcoming party, they wouldn’t be hiding...*

“Everyone, be careful! Someone’s coming!” I raised my voice in alarm, hoping I didn’t get us all in trouble. Everyone tensed up at once, except for Victorica.

“Oh, a welcoming party from the village? That’s quite courteous of them.” She looked up calmly, likely sensing the presence hiding from us.

I followed her gaze and noticed a figure in the treetops.

Oooh, an elf! It’s a handsome elf, just like in anime!

I knew now wasn’t the time to stare at them slack-jawed, but I couldn’t mask my excitement at seeing elves.

“Who would send a welcoming party for you, you calamity-bringing vampire!” The elf man called out, and with that as their signal, the other elven men emerged and aimed nocked bows at us.

W-Wait, what’s going on?! God, please tell me!

5. The Vampire of Calamity

Two elf men appeared from the treetops, and five more men emerged from ground-level, all of them armed with bows aiming directly at us...but it wasn't so much our group their attention was focused on as it was Victorica.

"Calamity-bringing vampire? Heh, I haven't the foggiest clue who you are referring to, for the only vampire present here is me." Victorica cocked her head curiously, undaunted in the face of the elves' antagonism.

"Hey, you do realize they probably mean you, right?" I told her from behind, since she seemed to honestly not get it.

"Huh? Why would they call me by such a name?! This is an outrage!" Victorica protested, looking genuinely offended.

"You take us for fools?! Do you really think we'll believe you don't recall the tragedy you brought on our home?!" one of the men shouted at her angrily.

"Victorica, what did you break? Just tell me. I won't get mad," I said, looking at her suspiciously.

"Hmm? Me? Did I break something?" Victorica placed an index finger on her chin pensively. She really did look like she didn't remember.

"Don't play coy! A few years ago, you came to this village to inform Miss Shelly you'll be going to sleep! Or did you forget that too?" the elf demanded, his expression contorted in anger.

"Hmm. Yes, I did hold a party to commemorate my temporary farewell. That was quite fun," Victorica said, grinning in contrast to the elf's rage.

"F-Fun?! You had fun?!" The man looked so outraged by her response that he nocked his bow.

"Roy, wait! You can't handle her on your own!" one of the other elves called out.

"Don't stop me, Schweiz! That woman says she had fun terrorizing our village!" Roy shouted, his good looks ruined by the fury distorting his features

as he rejected his friend's argument and made to loose an arrow in our direction.

Were he to shoot an arrow, a battle would be all but inevitable. I didn't know what had gotten the elves so riled up, but I wanted to prevent needless fighting if it was at all possible.

"Victorica, I don't know what you did, but say you're sorry! Apologize!" I told her.

"Why should I have to apologize?!"

"You definitely did something during that party of yours! What happened?!"

"Hmmm... Well, I was intoxicated at the time, so I don't remember all that well, but I do think something happened. I was in a merry mood, so I put on a special performance. What of it?"

"What kind of performance?"

"Heh heh heh. Hang onto your skirt: I had my minion, the bone dragon, perform party tricks! I don't quite remember what we did because of the alcohol, however. Come to think of it, father had told me I shouldn't drink..."

While we pretty much ignored the elves, Victorica shared a pretty startling story. Just that vague story alone was enough to leave me stunned. *Jeez, alcohol is scary. Wait, no, that's not even the issue here—she's guilty! She's totally guilty. There's no defending her.*

"So, you finally remembered," Roy snarled, enraged at my and Victorica's exchange. "Your vicious bone dragon's sudden appearance caused mass panic, and by the time the commotion ended, half of our village was destroyed! Furthermore, as your bone dragon ran amok, you simply neglected it and slept! Our chief is traumatized by the sight of moonlit nights thanks to you!" He nocked his bow, prepared to at last shoot Victorica for what she'd wrought in his village.

"Wait, please!" A dignified voice cut between them. Lady Rain, riding atop Snow's back, stood between Roy and Victorica, spreading both arms to shield the vampire girl.

In the face of Lady Rain's resolve, Roy slackened the tension in his bowstring, and the other elves were all charmed and staring at her—Lady Rain's demeanor was simply that majestic and overwhelming.

"D-Do not get in our way, human girl. You'll get hurt," Roy threatened.

"I won't move." Lady Rain didn't flinch. "I do, however, wish to make amends for what Victorica did, so won't you please restrain your anger?"

"Big sister, you shouldn't need to make amends for me—" Victorica argued, like the idea of apologizing for any of this outraged her.

"Silence, Victorica!" Lady Rain snapped at her.

Seeing the "big sister" who'd been so kind to her thus far react with anger, Victorica jolted and hung her head in silence. Her uncovered eye filled up with tears, and she looked like she would start crying at any second.

Seeing this, Lady Rain's dignified expression waned as the realization set in that she'd just made a girl cry—indeed, although her words had been directed at Victorica, we were all stunned silent by the intensity.

"Roy, everyone, put down your bows."

As Roy remained too shocked to act, the man called Schweiz passed by him and approached Snow. Seeing this, Lady Rain got off Snow's back and put Lily down. Schweiz bowed respectfully before her.

"My name is Schweiz, and I serve as proxy to our clan's chief. Allow me to apologize for my comrades' disrespect, golden princess protected by the divine beast."

Schweiz took Lady Rain's hand and kissed the back of her palm, all like it was completely natural for him. It was such a shocking image it made all us girls stiffen and go red in the face. Well, except for Fifi, who remained as stone-faced as usual, and Victorica, who somehow managed the impressive feat of going even more pale than a vampire normally is.

"Y-You see, I go by Rain right now for reasons, and, um, I'm no golden princess..." Lady Rain explained.

"Princess Rain, then. A lovely name," the handsome elf said with a brilliant

smile.

“No, I’m not a prin—”

“Princess Rain. This may be forward of me, but I’ve fallen in love with you at first sight. Please, would you enter a relationship with me with marriage in mind?”

Schweiz was ignoring Lady Rain’s attempts to explain herself only to make this absurd statement. Both us and the other elves could only stare in disbelief, unable to keep up with the conversation.

“H-Huuuuuh...? What are you saying?!” Roy broke the silence, his expression stunned.

“Heh. Love descends without warning. Don’t you know that, Roy?”

“No, I don’t.”

“She has a beautiful, graceful appearance backed by firm attitude and will,” Schweiz said with a grin, seemingly losing himself in his words. “She has the aura of a woman who stands above and over the people, yet she also seems to bear the tolerance to care for and understand others. Perfect! She’s simply perfect! My ideal bride! Do you understand how I feel, Roy?!”

“Nope. Not one bit.”

“G... G... G...”

As my thoughts still failed to catch up to this, I heard Victorica tremble angrily next to me, whispering.

“Victorica?” I turned to look at her.

“Guiltyyy! You rotten elf!” Victorica roared, showing off her fangs and revealing her hidden red eye as she locked her gaze on Schweiz.

Huh, I thought she always took care when taking off her eyepatch. Are you like, really calm or really emotional? Make up your mind, girl.

The rabid vampire was gnashing her fangs and looked prime to pounce on the elf.

“Stay! Victorica, stay! Do you want Lady Rain to scold you again?!” I shouted

and held her arms from behind. She already had a previous offense to her name, after all. We couldn't further deteriorate our relations with the elves.

"E-Erm, ah... This is all...quite troubling..." Lady Rain finally said, Victorica's shout bringing her back from her stunned silence at having an elf kiss her hand and propose to her on the spot.

"My apologies for confusing you by being so forward. I'm sure this seemed quite rude to you. My feelings had to be put into words!"

It was honestly the sort of turn of events you'd expect from a fairy tale involving princesses, but what Schweiz got wrong was that it would have been more appropriate a bit later, under better circumstances—not a few minutes after first meeting someone.

Lady Rain was visibly panicking from Schweiz's fervor, so she blurted out, "I'm, uh, I'm a man!"

It was such a bolt from the blue for the elves that they simply all stared at her blankly for a moment. Victorica, who was struggling in my grip, also froze up in shock.

"Heh heh. That's a very curious joke. I took you for a more firm woman, but it appears you're quite the jokester. Lovely."

Schweiz completely ignored Lady Rain's bombshell confession and somehow became more charmed by her for it.

They say love is blind, but I guess it's deaf and slow in the head too. I sighed.

"Let's go, then." Schweiz took Lady Rain's hand without missing a beat and walked ahead of her.

"W-Wait, wait, wait! Where are you going, Schweiz?! You're not going to welcome them into the village, are you?!" Roy stood in Schweiz's way and pointed at Victorica.

"Yes, of course I am. She has business in our village, after all, and she wishes to learn more about us and the village."

Roy stared at him, slack-jawed. The chief's proxy, who'd said he wouldn't let us into the village mere minutes ago, had changed his mind so easily.

“A-Are you joking?! Are you really going to let that vampire into our village? As head of security, I cannot agree to this!” Roy continued to shout, pointing at Victorica rudely.

I could relate to his anger, but I wished he’d stop pointing. Since I was standing next to Victorica, it made me feel like I was being blamed here too.

“Very well. Then we’ll leave the vampire here. Is that acceptable?” Schweiz said without hesitation.

Victorica heard this and was very much annoyed—I could almost hear something snap in her head. Feeling her palpable indignation, I broke into a cold sweat.

“Mweh heh heh. It’s been ages since I’ve felt the blood coursing through me like this. Yee hee hee, let us begin the bloodbath, shall we—” Victorica let out a peculiar laughter and lunged forward, fangs out and eyes glinting red. Left with no recourse, I pulled her into the sunlight without her parasol. “Ooow!”

“Well, everyone, as you can see, this girl is by no means as dangerous as she looks!” I said with a forced smile, holding a thrashing Victorica in my arms. “See how weak she is under the sun? She’s totally safe!” I said, showing her off for everyone to see.

“Aaah! It’s hot! It hurts! Unhand me, you vile vixen!” she protested.

“...She seems safe enough to me, Roy. That vampire can’t even shake off a villager’s grip.”

“I suppose the monsters she summons are the problem, but she herself is weak?” another elf suggested.

In truth, Victorica was probably stronger than any elf here. If it had been anyone but me restraining her, they surely wouldn’t have gotten this impression. And since I was dressed as a villager...

“W-We’ll keep a close eye on her, and we have business with Miss Shelly too. Once we’re done, we’ll head back right away!” I said, trying to sway them.

“I said it’s hot, you zombie-brained woman!” Victorica hurled insults at me.

“Shut up! It’s your fault we’re in this mess!” I grabbed her by the head with an

iron grip, as had become customary.

“Ow, ow! I give up! Stop! Aaah, it burns, aaaaaah!”

“H-Hey, all right, we get it, leave her alone. I’m starting to feel bad for the vampire...” Roy, of all people, asked me to stop.

“Can we bring her along, then?” I asked.

“Y-Yeah... I don’t mind, so let her go.”

“Isn’t that great, Victorica?” I grinned at Victorica and let go of her. She fell prostrate on the ground, where the sun continued frying her. “Aaaah! Victorica, hang on! Your wounds are still shallow, you can heal them!” I shook Victorica’s limp form.

“No, they’re probably quite deep.” Tutte said dryly, holding up the parasol to block off the sunlight.

And so, despite many obstacles and predicaments, we managed to reach our destination, the elven village.

6. Meeting Shelly, and...

After a short trek through the forest, the path opened out, and what looked like man-made buildings came into view. I didn’t know how they were built, but somehow, the buildings seemed fully integrated into the forest itself. They were both above, below, and in some cases even within the forest’s large trees.

“So, this is the elven forest...” I said.

We all looked upon it like country bumpkins, overwhelmed by the majesty of the sight.

“...The techniques used to create these structures have been hidden from the outside world. Fascinating.” Fifi alone stared at the place from another perspective, which made me wonder if we’d have to keep an eye on her too. My initial excitement gave way to nervous concern.

“Fifi, could you keep those thoughts for later...?” I asked.

“...It makes me want to start pulling stuff apart,” Fifi murmured something

very scary.

“Wait, stop! You can’t just dissect other people’s things without permission!”

Fifi stared at me blankly. I couldn’t read into her feelings through her stone-faced expression, so I could only pray she had some idea of common sense.

“Hey, stop that, you rotten elf!” Victorica hissed. “No one said you’re allowed to offer my big sister your hand as she gets off the divine beast! That’s my job!”

“Aha ha ha, I’m afraid this is a case of first come first serve,” Schweitz retorted. “Those who dawdle lose out—you would do well to learn that.”

“No, if anything, *you* should learn to act with moderation. Actually, no, you don’t have to learn it! I’ll just reduce you to ash where you stand!”

Aaaaaaaah! I covered my face with my hands.

While I was trying to keep Fifi on a leash, more trouble broke out in another corner of our group.

“Magiluka, sorry, could you keep an eye on Fifi so she doesn’t go off and cause trouble? I have idiots to silence.”

I left the scene to Magiluka’s dependable hands and moved in to save Lady Rain by standing between Victorica and Schweiz to stop them from bickering over her. Since she’d made Victorica cry earlier, Lady Rain couldn’t bring herself to treat the vampire harshly again.

On the way here, Lady Rain had explained her current situation to the elves (while keeping her original status as a prince secret), but they hadn’t believed her. She was such a perfect princess, it perhaps made sense they’d have a hard time believing she used to be a man, but still...

Looking around, I saw the village’s elves notice Victorica’s angry shouting. They recognized her and instantly started quaking in fear. They were cautious, afraid she would bring calamity to their village again.

“Viiiiictooooriiiiiicaaaaaa!” I said with a rumbling voice as I grabbed her head from behind in a talon grip. She froze up and broke into a cold sweat, feeling my grip. “Let’s go over there and have a little chat, shall we? ♪”

With a smile on my lips, I dragged her by the head into the sunlight.

“No, I’m busy right now, so— Nghaaa! It buuuurns!”

With the elves still traumatized by the bone dragon incident watching on, I burned her like a witch...or rather, condemned her to vampire sunbathing.

“Now, are you going to apologize to the nice elves for causing them trouble with your dragon?”

“It burns, aaaaaah! I’m sorry, I’m sorryyyy!”

Sunbathing sounds very simple on paper, but Victorica was so agonized that the elves were mostly shocked and appalled, a few of them asking me to stop. That said, I could only do this because Victorica was a hybrid vampire. If she’d been a full-blooded vampire, this would have had dire consequences.

“Aaah, ack...!” Victorica gasped and panted after I finally let her stand in the shade, white smoke rising from her trembling limbs. “A-Aldia’s white devil...is what you are. There’s a white devil in the premises! The legends were true! A white devil really does come to punish wrongdoers!”

“Just think of this as rightful punishment for your crimes. Also, don’t call me a white devil. That’s a name for the Argent Knight, and I’m clearly nothing more than an average villager girl,” I explained, correcting her.

“Oh, no, if you can just punish someone that viciously without batting an eyelash, you’re definitely a devil.” Snow chimed in. *“A devil wearing a villager’s skin. Everyone’s more afraid of you than they are of Victorica right now, you know.”*

“Huh?!” Prompted by Snow’s assessment, I looked around in a panic. This made all the villagers jolt, go pale in the face, and avert their gazes from me. Some even actively ran for cover.

“N-No, I’m...I’m just an ordinary villager...” I hung my head next to Victorica, who was hanging her head for other reasons.

“It’s your fault for making such a display of yourself, Lady Mary,” Tutte counseled me.

“...It just ticked me off, and I had to,” I mumbled.

“That’s the same excuse Lady Victorica made to explain why she kept messing

with you," Tutte pointed out. "You both think the same way."

"Ack!" As if I weren't suffering from enough emotional damage, Tutte ruthlessly piled on another helping of psychic torment.

"Oh? I heard you were being subjected to a sunbath in the plaza, Victorica, but are you done already?" A woman's voice cut into our exchange—an elven woman's voice, to be precise.

"S-Shelly...?" Victorica said with surprise, relief apparent on her face. "You came to save me? I knew I could rely on you, my fr—"

"No, it's just that it's not often you get your comeuppance like this, so I wanted to see what you'd look like charred," The elf, Shelly, said bluntly with a very kind smile. "It seems I came over too late though. A pity."

"Aaah, I forgot, that's the kind of woman you are! Color me disappointed!" Victorica complained, mostly back to normal already.

"I mean, sunlight doesn't affect you that severely, does it? It would've been a waste of time to worry. Actually, this is a rare, precious chance, so do let me capitalize on it." Shelly drew closer to Victorica.

Wait, "Shelly"?

"*You're* Miss Shelly?!" I finally recovered from my psychic damage and hopped to my feet, realizing this was the elf we'd come here to find.

She had the long, pointy years of an elf, along with neatly cut shoulder-length hair, which was pale green—all too fitting a color for someone who lived in a forest. Her aquamarine eyes were honed in on Victorica with utter fascination.

As I observed Shelly fixedly, Schweiz approached from behind and spoke to her.

"Oh, Shelly, you're here?"

"Oh, hello, brother. I thought you went to inspect the disturbance at the barrier?"

I tensed up at the mention of the barrier. After all the abuse I'd put Victorica through for troubling the village, I feared her retribution in case I turned out to have caused them trouble too—and I wasn't confident I'd be able to talk my

way out of it.

I reflexively slipped behind Tutte, trying to hide myself behind her back.

“The barrier’s issue was a temporary one. It was probably caused by deterioration from age. It was made long ago, so it might be time to repair and rebuild it.”

Thanks to Schweiz’s mistaken opinion, I was able to avoid suspicion. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“But, thanks to it, I got to meet my fated woman!” Schweiz appended excitedly.

“Uh, yes, sure. How many fated women have you met already? I’ve lost count.” Shelly shrugged him off, clearly not taking him seriously.

Wait, “how many”? Did she just say he’s been treating multiple women like that? I felt a twinge of concern. *Maybe this elf didn’t really fall in love at first sight, but rather...*

“It’s Princess Rain right here. She came to meet you.” Schweiz introduced Lady Rain, casually wrapping an arm around her waist.

“Like I said, I’m not a princess...” She initially looked very bothered, but realizing we were in front of the person who could fix this situation, she moved the conversation along. “E-Erm, hello, Miss Shelly. It’s an honor to finally meet you.”

Meanwhile, Victorica pinched Schweiz’s hand, making it jerk away from Lady Rain’s waist.

“No need to be so formal around an elf. Hmm. Rain, you say. Mmhmm...” Shelly said and started looking at her fixedly.

True to her profession as a magus smith, her eyes seemed to pry into and investigate whatever she was focused on, the same way Fifi’s did. It seemed she realized something had happened to Lady Rain. I swallowed nervously, awaiting Shelly’s next words.

“You’re the kind of beauty who’d even charm an elf like me. You’d be wasted on my brother, honestly.” She nodded to herself, convinced, not even a trace of

a magus smith's wisdom to her eyes.

Lady Rain, much like I did, expected something more cogent out of her, and her shoulders drooped in disappointment.

"Um, Miss Shelly, my apologies for chiming in, but do you not recognize the circlet on Lady Rain's forehead?" Magiluka asked impatiently.

"Circlet?" Shelly looked at Lady Rain's forehead. "Oh, this..."

It seemed she recognized it. We swallowed nervously as she got a serious look on her face.

"Pfft, what a childish design. What kind of amateur made this?" She brought a hand to her lips and giggled.

"*You* did! You helped make this thing!" I retorted, very nearly falling over from the shock.

"Huh? I did?" She looked genuinely surprised. It didn't seem she was playing dumb, but rather like she really didn't realize she'd made this.

"Agh, this always happens." Victorica sighed, seeing our confusion, and offered some helpful advice. "Shelly, you have a contract prepared, don't you? How about you check that?"

"Oh, true." Shelly brought her hands together in a small clap. "Then, my apologies, but can I escort you to my workshop?" She walked off to lead the way.

Huh? I guess she's an honest, diligent elf who keeps all her contracts in order. Color me impressed. Maybe she's just forgetful? I pondered as we followed her.

Shelly led us to her house, and after we waited outside for a while, she came out with a slip of paper.

"Oh, here, I found it. Aaah, yes, yes, hmm. Right, this thing. It does take me back..." She said pensively, looking like an old lady thinking back on the good old days. "Right, I think I remember now. It was for that gaudy noble boy. Is he doing well?"

It's weird. She looks just a bit older than us, but Shelly feels like grandma, I thought to myself, wishing her appearance would match her behavior or the

other way around.

“He’s doing fine for himself, I think, but Miss Shelly, let me cut to the chase. Can you help us take off this circlet?” Lady Rain asked.

“Huh? You can’t take it off?” Shelly said, looking surprised.

Oh boy, this feels like déjà vu...

She took out what looked like a pair of spectacles and inspected the circlet shining on Lady Rain’s head. She then took out what appeared to be a stethoscope and pressed it against the circlet.

Is this a magus smith’s workshop or a doctor’s office? I thought to myself dryly as I watched her go about her inspection.

“Hmm...” Shelly took off the stethoscope and gave her verdict. “I’m terribly sorry to say it, but I’m afraid this circlet can’t be removed.”

Lady Rain and Magiluka looked crushed by her words. Seeing this, Shelly swiftly appended, “Ah, pardon, I didn’t word that quite right. I mean I can’t take it off right now.”

“...Is the reason it won’t come off because of the fairy’s mischief effect?” Fifi, who worked in the same field, joined the conversation.

“Oh, I’m surprised you know about that. Are you in the trade, too?”

“...Not quite in the same trade as you. I am Fifi, a magus smith from the demons’ side.”

“Oh, you’re part of that straitlaced crowd, are you?” Shelly said with a smile.

Fifi remained expressionless, but I noticed the way her fluffy ears twitched.

Huh? Do elf magus smiths and demon magus smiths not get along?

I assumed that like in most industries, there was rivalry between different factions and disciplines, but I didn’t know that the world of magus smiths had these kinds of divides. Looking back, Fifi *had* mentioned something about how elf magus smiths used techniques that are considered unfair and vile.

“Um, you said you can’t take it off right now, but does that mean there’s a way of getting it off after all?” Magiluka asked, leaving Tutte and Safina to tend

to Lady Rain, who was still in a state of shock. Normally, Victorica would look after Lady Rain, but she was resting in another room to recover from sunbathing.

"Well, yes, like young Fifi here said, fairy mischief is currently acting on the circlet, so it cannot be removed for the time being."

The elves being long-lived, I imagined Fifi really was like an infant compared to her, but I could see Fifi's ears twitch at being called "young."

Fifi's pretty scary when she's mad. Maybe she's so expressionless because her tail and ears express her feelings instead? Aww, thinking about that makes me so curious! I can't stand it!

As I tensed up over something inconsequential, Shelly began explaining what fairy's mischief actually is. As its name implied, fairy's mischief was a supernatural phenomenon caused by fairies doing all sorts of tricks and pranks. Fairies typically exist in a space separate from this world called the fairy plane, a dimension that humans and most races of this world couldn't normally see or perceive in any way.

The fairy plane operated on different rules compared to our world, and it allowed for supernatural mysteries like what we were experiencing currently to happen. This was effectively what Fifi complained about. Elves relied on the fairies' abilities to perform all manner of impossible feats, which struck her as cheating. It was basically an unfair, foul play elves could resort to thanks to their ability to communicate with fairies and spirits.

According to Shelly, this power was mysterious and unknowable, which was what made it volatile and prone to going out of control. Such unpredictable occurrences are common whenever fairies are involved.

"So, what you're saying is right now, this circlet is in a volatile, out of control state? But why? What made it happen?" Magiluka asked.

"Well, you see... I originally asked them to just temporarily turn a boy into a girl, and they agreed. But then, he never ended up actually using their power and closed it away in a box, and their power never being put to use after they were gracious enough to offer it put them in a foul mood. So I told him to just put it on for a while, but he got all sulky and ended up burying the thing."

Shelly laughed off the question, as if to say “Goodness, what a bother!” In other words, John Ordile’s frivolous actions had incurred the wrath of the fairies, and Lady Rain had ended up getting hit by their ire.

“They spent years building up a grudge, swearing they’d be put to use no matter what, so when you put it on, they made it stick to you as a means of payback.”

“Can’t we do something to take it off?” Lady Rain asked timidly, finally recovering from her shock.

“Hmm... Well, us elves can ask the fairies for help, but we can’t force them to do anything. So I think the simplest way would be to just wait until they’re satisfied?”

“And how long will that be?”

“Well, fairies are moody creatures. It could take as many years as they spent in the circlet, if not longer. All I can say is that it won’t happen right away. At first, they only did it out of anger, but now they’re having fun watching you. Which, well, good for you. You’re liked by the fairies.”

Hearing this, Lady Rain looked ready to fall off her chair again. The fairies had been trapped in the circlet for over ten years, and this could last for that long. Perhaps ten years might not have felt that long for the fairies, but for us humans, it was a substantial period of time.

“...This is why I don’t like elven-made items. They’re all vicious like that. Even poorly made magic items are better in this regard,” Fifi mumbled, verbally dissing Shelly while we were all too aghast to react. Shelly’s elf ears twitched in agitation.

“Well, it’s at least better than the poor products of some other camp I could mention, whose items not only take a long time to make and cost a fortune to produce, but also only work for certain groups of people,” she retorted with a smile.

One was expressionless and the other was grinning, but I could see the sparks flying between them, like there was a dragon and a tiger standing behind them.

Uh... Fifi’s more of a fox than a tiger, though...

“I-Isn’t there some other way?” Magiluka asked desperately as she glanced at Lady Rain, who was being held up and fanned by Safina and Tutte.

“Hmm... Well, I can’t recommend it, but we could try directly negotiating with the fairies.”

“Negotiating with them, you say...? But didn’t you talk to the fairies to figure out our current situation? That’s how you know the circlet won’t come off, correct?” Magiluka asked.

“Oh, no, no. I didn’t mean *I’d* be negotiating with them, but rather you, little Rain,” she said, turning to look at Rain, who had just come out of shock again.

“M-Me? But I don’t have that kind of power...”

“Yes, normally, humans can’t converse with fairies. That’s something only those beloved by the gods or the spirits can do. However, with the help of our elven techniques and powers, it can be done.”

“In that case...!” Lady Rain instantly reacted to the light at the end of the tunnel, but Miss Shelly held up a hand, signaling for her to wait.

“Like I’ve said, I can’t recommend it. It’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous how?”

We failed to grasp how talking to fairies would be dangerous, but Shelly paused for a moment, like she was trying to pick her words properly.

“...The fairies’ bodies are quite vague, so negotiating with them creates a mental, spiritual link—and that’s very dangerous for humans,” Fifi said dryly, straight and to the point. “It can cause the mind to collapse. And even if you can avoid that, there’s the risk of the fairies consuming a defenseless mind.”

“...Indeed. You’re well informed.” Shelly nodded. “And as far as I can see, Little Rain isn’t in a position where she can expose herself to danger. Keep in mind, even elves can fail at this.”

“...But it’s still better than waiting for that long...” Lady Rain said anxiously.

“You should take your time and think it over carefully, I say. I’ll go talk to my brother to arrange for you to stay in the village for a while.”

“...Thank you.”

We’d hoped that meeting Shelly would resolve this problem quickly, but now Lady Rain was faced with a difficult trial, and this wasn’t something my strength could resolve. We could only watch over her anxiously as we awaited her decision.

7. Is This the Power of a Princess?

The following morning...

“Oh, Little Mary. I see you picked quite a lot,” an elf lady (she looked to be in her late twenties, but was apparently aged in the three digits) called out to me.

“Yes, there were lots growing over there!” I showed her the fruit I was carrying in my pinched up skirt.



“Oh, that’s wonderful. But don’t stray too far, you hear? The forest can be very dangerous.”

“I’ll be careful!” I replied to the elf lady—who was also picking fruit—with a smile, and I looked up at the mystifying visage of the forest, sunlight filtering in beautifully through the treetops.

A flock of small birds fluttered around me, chirping like they were speaking to me.

“Oh, are you worried about me, birdies? There’s no need for concern. I’m fine.” I smiled at the birds and offered up one of the fruits I’d gathered. This made the birdies perch on my hand and start to peck at it.

“Hee hee hee, it tickles.”

I smiled at the birds gathering around me, and the elves working nearby in the forest looked at us warmly. There was no dread or tension in their eyes.

Good. This whole performance is a bit too saccharine for my tastes, but it makes for a good impression. Good going, me!

“Lady Mary, why are you shamelessly acting like some fairy tale village girl? It does suit you, but it’s so transparent, it grosses out anyone who knows you.” Tutte’s scathing criticism instantly hit me in the shame bone.

At present, Shelly had had Schweitz arrange for us to stay at his large home, as he was the son of the chief. The current chief was traumatized by Victorica’s bone dragon incident, so he moved to a deeper, more peaceful part of the village with his wife to recuperate. Thanks to this, he was being kept in the dark about Victorica being in the village again—no need to pick at those emotional scars, after all.

As we waited for Lady Rain to come to her decision, I was left with time to spare, but given the situation, I couldn’t space out all day long. After all, I needed to dispel the scary impression I’d given the elves on my first day here.

As for what everyone else was doing...

Sacher was training with Roy’s guard unit. I was surprised to see him in their morning session when I was on my way to help the elves gather fruit.

It's weird... He can be really outgoing sometimes.

Magiluka was absorbed in reading books in Shelly's workshop. When I woke up, I was surprised to find her seated in the same spot she'd been in when I went to sleep, apparently having stayed up all night reading. I could only hope she was getting enough sleep.

I guess with so many books on magical plants and medicinal herbs here, it makes sense Magiluka would go full bookworm.

Lastly, there was Safina. She'd wanted to hang out with me, but Fifi took her off to test some new magical gear she'd developed. Fifi had also asked for my opinion, but I politely declined, dreading the prospect of saying something wrong and making everyone scared of me again. Shelly had ended up joining them, intent on using Safina for some test of her own or another. I had to hope she was safe.

Anyway, I just hope I didn't inspire her to make some crazy item again.

Either way, we were all doing our own thing, and mine was helping the elves Shelly had introduced me to do their work in an attempt to lift the bad impression I'd made.

I can't believe Tutte would call my generous aid unashamed acting... It's plenty embarrassing, actually, but I need to change people's minds somehow!

"Oh, what are you saying, big sis? I'm just being myself! This isn't an act!"

"'Big sis'?!" Tutte took a step back, like I'd just stabbed her with my words. She covered her face and looked up at me helplessly.

"What's wrong, big sis? Hey, big sis!"

"S-Stop..."

I approached Tutte, repeating the words as she turned her back to me, going red up to her ears.

"Hee hee, you two really do look like friendly villager sisters." Lady Rain approached us with a smile.

After seeing Lady Rain sitting inside the house, lost in contemplation over what to do, Shelly had apparently told her to go out and join me in helping the

elves for a change of pace.

“Oh, Lady Rain, goodness. You’ll dirty your dress if you carry this thing.” The elf lady from earlier spotted Lady Rain carrying a basket, then turned to me. “Mary, could you take it from her?”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t—” Lady Rain protested.

“All right, no problem. Lady Rain, I’ll carry it for you.” I grinned in agreement, taking the basket from Lady Rain and putting the berries I’d found earlier into it.

Oh, this is great! She calls her “Lady” Rain, but I’m just little old Mary! I’m being treated as just a normal person! Lady Rain’s the main heroine here, and I’m just a background character!

I cheered inwardly over my background character status. Looking around, I could see all the elves here were treating Lady Rain with dignity and reverence, and it clearly wasn’t just because the chief’s son, Schweiz, had fallen in love with her at first sight.

“I wonder why the elves treat Lady Rain like some kind of princess. Is this the power of the mysterious Princess class?”

“That’s clearly not why.” I heard a voice in my head.

“Oh, Snow, I didn’t think I’d see you wake up and get to work today.”

I’d checked on Snow before leaving, but she was loitering about at the house.

“I’m not here to work, I’m only here because Lily wanted to see her.” Snow said before putting Lily, whom she was carrying in her mouth, down on the ground. Lily happily ran off toward Lady Rain.

“Oh, that’s just precious. But, yeah, about what I was saying...”

“Hmm? Oh, about why the elves treat her so dearly? Well, to begin with, there’s Lily. The elves can tell at a glance that we’re divine beasts, and Lily’s so attached to Rain that they think she’s beloved by divine beasts.”

“Really...?”

“Besides, scary people like you and Victorica obey her orders. That’s enough to show how high she is on the pecking order.”

“That makes se— Ah, hey, I resent that! Who are you calling scary?” I drew toward her menacingly.

“A-Ah, and there’s uh, the circlet too.” Snow averted her gaze. *“The fairies’ power turned the prince into a princess, so as far as the elves can see, her body is enveloped with the fairies’ magic. Since the fairies are enjoying her current situation, there’s nothing malevolent to be seen, so it gives the impression the fairies favor her.*

“That’s a lot of reasons all at once. I can see why elves ignorant of the full situation would start worshiping her then. I guess that’s the power of the Princess class for you!” I said, satisfied.

“It’s got nothing to do with her class!” Snow placed one of her front paws on my head and retorted.

“Hee hee, I don’t know what you two are talking about, but you do look like you’re having fun.” Lady Rain seemed amused as she approached us with Lily in her arms. “They said that the work past here would be dangerous for anyone who isn’t an elf, so they want us to head back to the village for now.”

As she said this, I saw a few of the elf girls run off and weave skillfully between the trees.

“Yes, that does look a bit difficult to manage. Let’s head back.” I said.

For the time being, I felt like I’d done enough to fix my impression among these ladies, so if they would simply tell the other elves about it, I’d be good. I looked up, satisfied, and saw the elves off before turning around to return to the village with Lady Rain.

On the way there, we ran into a group of male elves led by Roy.

“Hmm? What are you doing in these parts?” he called out to us.

“We were helping the others work.” Lady Rain replied with a smile.

“Ah, is that right? Thanks for putting in the effort to help us, milady.” Roy replied politely.

Wow, that’s the Princess class for you. Even Roy, the guy who was most cautious about us, is wrapped around her little finger!

Roy stared at Lady Rain, mumbling like he was trying to say something, when one of the other elves urged him on.

“Captain, we need to hurry.”

“Aaah, yes, right.”

“Did something hap— Mmf?!” Lady Rain made to ask Roy as he turned away, but I clasped a hand over her mouth.

That was close. If she’d have asked ‘Did something happen?’ she’d have stuck her nose into this trouble. Dogs are bliss, let sleeping ignorance lay, all that.

With her mouth blocked, Lady Rain glanced sideways at me, unsure as to why I’d done that. Roy turned to look at us quizzically too.

“Oh, ah, nothing, don’t mind her. Oho ho ho, good luck with your duties. Do be careful!” I laughed their gazes off with a feigned smile.

“...Weird girl,” he said rudely, but his eyes were only fixed on Lady Rain. “Ah, we’re heading out to help a group that went out to hunt but ran into a group of giant rats. You girls be careful on your way back too. We’re off!”

Having given us a needless rundown of the situation, Roy raced off.

“Giant rats...” Lady Rain said as I let go of her mouth and cradled my head. “I hear a lot about these creatures. It’s a bit concerning, don’t you...think?”

Gaaaaaaah! That guy can’t read the room at all! I was trying to avoid hearing about this, and he just spat it out!

“L-Lady Mary, what’s wrong?” Lady Rain said, flustered at me grabbing my head in frustration.

“You see, Lady Mary has an eccentric penchant for having the most incomprehensible thoughts at times. Just leave her be.” Tutte stopped her.

“Erm... Is that right?” Lady Rain said awkwardly, unsure about how to respond.

“Wait, Tutte, did you just call me *eccentric*?” I snapped out of my frustration and glared at my maid.

“W-Well, you heard what Sir Roy said. Let us return to the village.” She looked

away from me evasively and urged Lady Rain to go on.

“Hey, Tutte, I said wait! You said it! I totally heard yooooou!” I took after them, and only when we’d reached the village did I catch up to Tutte and question her thoroughly.

8. The Time to Decide

When we returned to the village, the elves all greeted Lady Rain with smiles, like their princess had just waltzed in—but when they looked at me, they seemed to flinch a little. Undoing this misunderstanding would be difficult.

Aaah, I faked my smile so much it's stuck...

I rubbed my tired cheeks, and Lady Rain looked at me with concern.

"I realize you only did it to make them less afraid of Miss Victorica, but to think they're wary of you now..."

"Huh? Oh, no, no, I didn't do it for a good reason like that. It just...happened, if that makes sense." I denied her words. I'd only messed up, yet somehow, she'd interpreted it as me making a sacrifice.

"But—" Lady Rain insisted.

"It's fine, really! No need to talk about it. I'm just glad everyone's smiling and Victorica's being accepted," I said, trying to steer Lady Rain away from this topic.

Talking about this was bound to lead to topics I preferred we wouldn't touch, so I honestly wanted her to just move on.

"'Everyone's smiling,' huh?" Lady Rain said pensively, like my words had inspired something in her.

"...Lady Rain?"

"Hee hee. It seems you have a way of giving me the encouragement I need at the most unpredictable times. That's what I'd expect of you, Lady Mary." She complimented me for some reason and walked off with a breezy smile.

I remained where I was, frozen in the same pose I'd taken when I was making excuses, and watched her leave. "Did I, uh, do something again?"

"Does it come as any surprise at this point, Lady Mary?" Tutte replied as she followed Lady Rain.

"Aaaaaaah, whyyyyy?! I don't even know what I did, but I'm mad at myself

noooow!” I grabbed onto Snow, who was standing beside me, and buried my face in her fur to calm myself.

“Whoaaa! Hey, don’t just glomp me like that out of nowhere!” the divine beast protested.

“Ms. Shelly, I’ve decided. I’ll negotiate with the fairies.” Lady Rain entered Shelly’s workshop and made her resolve known.

“Hmm, good.” Shelly nodded with a smile. “I had a feeling you might— Ngh!”

“You mustn’t, big sister! It’s too dangerous!” Victorica cut Shelly off, pushing past her and getting in Lady Rain’s face.

“I’m well aware of the dangers, but I’ve made up my mind, and I don’t intend to go back on this decision.” Lady Rain looked straight at Victorica, never averting her gaze, to which the vampire girl shuddered.

Aaah, I wonder if Victorica is angry, worried, or upset nothing’s going her way. I just hope we can keep her from kicking up any hysterics. I might have to sentence her to more sunbathing.

I edged closer, standing at a distance where I could grab Victorica at a moment’s notice, but then I saw the look on her face.

“Aaaaah, that dignified attitude, those eyes burning with firm will! Big sister, you’re...you’re perfect! I’m atremble!” she said, shaking with excitement. I relaxed, although I was a bit grossed out.

“Princess, I shall abet whatever you decide,” Schweiz wormed his way between Victorica and Lady Rain, cupping Lady Rain’s hands in his own. “I am always by your sid— Ungh!”

“Don’t butt in, you rotten elf!” Victorica pulled him away forcefully before he could finish his sentence. “This was a sweet moment between my sister and me!”

I felt for Lady Rain. Her decision was supposed to be much more solemn, but these two ended up spoiling the atmosphere with their bickering.

“Yes, yes, that’s enough of that.” Shelly clapped, trying to take control of the situation. “Anyway, if that’s your choice, we need to make preparations.”

“Let us use our race’s ancient holy ground.” Schweiz was instantly on board and suggested something that sounded very highfalutin. “It should be easy to negotiate with the fairies there.”

Are you sure you want outsiders in your holy ground?

“Are you certain? I mean, it’s a holy ground...” Lady Rain asked the same question, seeming like she had some reservations.

“If it’s for you, I will gladly make an enemy of the entire village—” Schweiz said with a dashing smile as he gripped Lady Rain’s hand, but before he could finish his sentence... “Ngh!” Victorica landed a roundhouse kick on him.

When you stop to think about it, isn’t treating a tribe’s chief’s proxy like this a bit risky? I’m starting to worry here.

I glanced at Shelly gingerly, but she started howling with laughter at seeing her chief’s proxy get blown away by the kick.

Well, guess it’s fine, I concluded and put the matter behind me.

“But, uh, anyway, like he said, if we use the holy ground, it should lighten the burden on you, little Rain,” Shelly said, wiping away the tears in her eyes from cracking up. “But you know, Schweiz, your authority alone isn’t enough to permit them to use that area. We need the actual chief and other high ranking members of the village to give their consent. And knowing these geezers and crones...” Shelly looked fed-up, like she’d remembered something very bothersome. “Once, when I told them I’m setting out on a journey, they just wouldn’t give me their consent. They really can be pigheaded at times...” Shelly murmured to herself in complaint.

The chief was essentially Shelly’s father, but the way she spoke of the village’s higher-ups implied she had some bad history with them. The outlook was starting to look grim.

“Heh, let me tell you my secret, sister dearest,” Schweiz said. “All you have to do is not get caught.”

I was shocked. I didn’t think I’d hear this kind of talk from the chief’s proxy.

“...Oh, right. That *is* an option.” Shelly said, looking convinced. “Well, better

strike while the iron's hot!"

"Indeed. Now, if only there were some other incident that would keep everyone's attention away from us, things would be so much easier..."

The two elves started discussing their plan, with us having no room to get involved. But suddenly, the door to the room swung open, and Roy stormed in.

"Here you are, Schweiz!" he called out.

"Wh-Wh-What is it, Roy?!"

"W-We haven't done anything yet!"

The two siblings jolted and reacted suspiciously to Roy's appearance. He stared at them dubiously for a moment, but then he remembered why he came here and turned serious.

"There's trouble, Schweiz! There's a serious problem in the forest!"

The tense atmosphere made me gulp nervously, but as I looked at the two siblings, they were smirking viciously instead.

"What's wrong, Schweiz? Why the smile?" Roy asked.

"Oh, nothing, just thinking the heavens have sided with us... I mean, no, give me the details." He'd nearly blurted out his scheme.

"...You remember how giant rats have been growing in number recently?" Roy simply gave his report, perhaps feeling things were too urgent to worry about Schweiz's other comment.

Tch. I knew we'd end up dealing with the rat situation somehow...

"Ah, yes I've heard. But come now, a giant rat or two are hardly a threat." Schweiz didn't seem to take the matter too seriously.

"Indeed, they wouldn't be...if there were only one or two of them." Roy's expression, by contrast, was grim.

"What do you mean?"

"We received a report that a hunting party was attacked by a swarm of giant rats. We came in to help, and...we found a Forest Boar being attacked by a horde of the things."

“What?!” Schweiz exclaimed in disbelief. “That can’t be true, those boars are massive! How could mere rats be preying on it?!”

“Well, there were enough of them to fully cover its big body. There must have been at least fifty—and they were bigger than any giant rat I’ve run into before.”

Silence filled the room as Roy finished his story. I recalled what I’d heard over at the Karshana domain.

“Is this what you’d call overpopulation?” I asked.

Everyone looked at me with surprise.

“Ah, sorry, forget I said anything...” Startled by their looks, I took back my statement and wondered if I’d put my foot in my mouth.

“Giant rat overpopulation...? Those things are usually prey in this forest. How did their numbers grow large enough to cause overpopulation?” Roy asked, clearly ignoring my request.

Grr, he’s making a big deal out of what I said...

“It’s not impossible, but it’s highly unlikely.” Shelly moved things along. “Overpopulation, huh? I’m surprised you could come up with that with so little information, Mary. If this turns out to be right, then you’ve displayed some impressive insight.”

“Huh?!” I squeaked, realizing she was tooting my horn.

“...It would come as no surprise. Lady Elizabeth does hold Lady Mary in high regard.” Fifi commented, further improving their impression of me.

The elves all raised their voices in surprise, not expecting to hear the Ice-Blooded Witch’s name mentioned here. Victorica alone gritted her teeth bitterly and glared at me, but I silently ignored her.

“Fifi, please, don’t give people the wrong idea!” I whispered.

“...I’m just stating the facts. You saved the Relirex Kingdom from crisi—Mmmgh!”

I clasped a hand over the obstinate fox girl’s mouth. “Aha ha ha, pardon us,

we got off track. Just ignore what I said and let's move on!" I insisted.

"...As doubtful as it may be, we should keep the possibility of overpopulation in mind and look into it, Schweiz," Roy said, once again ignoring my request to be ignored.

Y-You again?!

"Hm, yes. My apologies, but we should look into it. And do be careful of any more monsters turning up," Schweiz concluded.

"Understood." Roy nodded and left the room.

"Heh heh, good work, Mary. You're quite the little strategist, aren't you!" Shelly grinned at me as she watched him go.

"Huh? What are you talking about?" I asked, baffled.

"There's no need to play coy," Schweiz said. "We just said we need some incident to get the princess over to the holy ground, remember?"

These siblings had somehow come up with this absurd interpretation of events, and I panicked.

What?! Seriously, what? What am I supposed to do?! God, throw me a bone here! With more and more fateful choices thrust upon me, I was losing my cool —I hadn't been able to change my fate even once.

"Aha ha ha..." I simply laughed, trying to dodge the question of which choice to make this time.

"...Lady Mary, you're making it look like you're tacitly admitting that you thought of that," Tutte whispered to me.

"Huh?" My smile stiffened when I realized everyone looked like that interpretation made perfect sense. My inability to avoid fate once again dealt me psychic damage, crushing my heart.

"...If there really is overpopulation, this means we'll have spotted it early. And even if it isn't one, everyone will be distracted by the giant rats. Either way, you've been of help to us. It's impressive you were able to come up with this foolproof plan on the spot, Lady Mary," Fifi said, effectively tightening the noose around me.

I could only whimper internally.

9. How Predictable

We all gathered up the following morning, and Shelly gave us a rundown of the situation.

“So as discussed, we’ll be doing it tonight, while everyone’s distracted by the giant rat situation.”

We were discussing the matter in secret as though we were some evil organization up to no good—well, to be fair, I guess we *were* up to no good.

“Worry not, Princess. I, Schweiz, will guide you to our sacred ground,” Schweiz declared, resolving to escort Lady Rain like it was the natural thing to do.

“What are you saying, Schweiz?” Shelly cut him off. “You’re the chief’s proxy, you can’t simply go missing. No, you should stay here.”

“N-Nooo!” Schweiz fell to his knees, looking shocked.

So your own scheme ended up working against you. Hoisted by your own petard, as they say. My condolences.

“Heh heh heh... Then I, Victorica, will escort you instead!” Victorica said, triumphantly gloating over Schweiz’s defeat.

“No, you’re staying behind too,” Shelly said. “The village’s top brass and the guards are all still wary of you. If you come with us, they’ll definitely find us out.”

“What cruel fate has befallen thee, Victorica!” Victorica fell to her knees, so thoroughly shocked she narrated her own reaction.

Okay, good! The way this is going, I’ll stay behind too!

After seeing her shoot down two volunteers, I decided to speak up too, expecting the same outcome.

“Then, uh, I’ll come along with you, Lady Rain!” I said anxiously, throwing expectant glances at Shelly.

“Yes, that’s a good idea.” Shelly agreed with absolutely no resistance.

Why?!

Since I stepped up and said I’d join myself, I couldn’t take it back.

“Um, what about us?” Magiluka asked Shelly while I was screaming in my mind.

“I’ll need to ask you and your friends to stay. We can’t afford to bring this many outsiders into our holy ground.”

“Objection!” I called out. I was counting on my friends, after all. “Why can I come but they can’t? I’m an outsider too!”

“Hmm, it’s...shall we say...collateral.”

I was struck speechless for a few seconds. *What kind of reason is that?*

“H-How so?”

“Hmm? Oh, Victorica told me about how you crushed her bone d—” Shelly started with a grin.

“Aaaah?!” I shouted and cut her off, realizing she was about to expose the events of the battle in Castle Bloodrain. “R-Right, collateral! I, uhh, I guess that’s reasonable!”

The door then opened with a thud again, and Roy hurried into the room.

“There you are, Schweiz!” he exclaimed.

“Aaah, it’s you again Roy...” Schweiz said, moping.

“W-We haven’t done anything yet!” Shelly said in a repeat of yesterday.

“What’s wrong with you, Schweiz? Why so depressed?” Roy asked, confused by how dispirited Schweiz looked.

“Ignore him, Roy. So, uhm, what is it?” Shelly urged him to move things along.

“Oh, right. Yesterday, I warned the village about the giant rats, and someone discovered their swarm. And when he led us to them, well... Mary.” Roy suddenly turned to me.

“Y-Yes?!” I let out a high-pitched response.

“You might have been right.”

Roy told us what he saw. The giant rats appeared to be nesting in a cave a good distance away from the village. Just from a cursory glance of the cave’s entrance, there was an extremely large number of rats. The giant rats currently prowling the forest had probably left the cave due to overpopulation.

“You were right, Lady Mary.” Safina looked at me with respect. “Impressive.”

“...Lady Elizabeth has her eye on you for good reason.” Fifi concluded.

Meanwhile, the more Roy told his story, the more nervous I became.

“E-Everyone, let’s stop talking about me and focus on what matters, shall we?” I said, gesturing like I was picking up an invisible box and putting it aside.

“Mweh heh heh... A swarm of giant rats would be nothing to me. Perhaps I should wipe them out to make up for me sitting things out,” Victorica said with the smile of a bloodthirsty animal.

“Huh? What are you sitting out on?” Roy asked.

“Oh, um, ignore her. It’s just that there’s a full moon today, so it makes her very antsy and oddly aggressive!” Shelly made up an excuse on the spot. Roy seemed to buy it.

“Who are you calling odd?! To begin with, why should I have to sit this—” Victorica protested, gradually growing outraged.

“Victorica, stay. Down, girl.” I held her back, silencing her.

Knowing her, she’d spill the beans about our whole plan. Victorica seemed to grow docile once she realized I was holding her back. Maybe all the sunbathing had conditioned her into being obedient.

I’m not sure if I should be happy about that or not. Some mixed feelings here...

“Well, uhh, Roy, why don’t you go and spearhead the hunting party? We’re counting on you to handle the giant rats! Good luck!” Schweiz started giving him very vague orders, earning him peeved glares from not just Roy but even from the rest of us.

He had lain himself out on the room’s desk, waving his hands lethargically.

“What’s gotten into you, Schweiz ?! Get a grip!” Roy hollered at him.

“‘Get a grip,’ he says! Can you even comprehend the pain of having to sit this out?!” Schweiz hollered back.

“What are you on about?!”

I was on Roy’s side this time, and honestly, I didn’t even want to begin to try to understand where Schweiz was coming from.

Meanwhile, I spotted Shelly approach Lady Rain and whisper into her ear.

“Huh? You really want me to do that?” Lady Rain asked, surprised.

“Yes, please.” Shelly brought her hands together like she was pleading.

What is Shelly trying to have her do?

Lady Rain took a deep breath and approached the two men. “Lord Schweiz.”

She looked up at him, both hands clenched in a praying pose. Her eyes, full of expectation, bound Schweiz in place.

“You’re the only one who can save the village in its time of need. Show me your courage,” Lady Rain said with the most imploring tone she could muster, likely at Shelly’s advice.

“Yes! Gladly!”

What is this, a pub? Not that I’ve ever been to one... I thought to myself dryly.

“Let’s go, Roy! Why are you just standing there? Follow me!” Schweiz said in an animated manner and sauntered off.

After a moment of shock and disbelief, Roy hurried after him. We watched them leave in silence.

“Now, Victorica,” Lady Rain said.

“Yes, sister?!” Victorica instantly stopped gritting her teeth in envy at the sight of how Lady Rain had spoken to Schweiz and perked up.

Shelly was hiding behind Lady Rain, whispering something. I figured out what they were up to.

“I know I asked my stupid br— I mean, Lord Schweiz for help,” Lady Rain said

and trailed off, realizing she was quoting Shelly verbatim, “but the truth is, you’re the only one I can actually rely on. Victorica, you’re smart. Surely you understand what I mean?” Lady Rain caressed Victorica’s cheek with a faint smile.

“SSister dearest!” Victorica squealed, frozen in place.

“Can you meet my expectations, precious Victorica?”

“Yes! Of course!” Victorica said, her cheeks flushed.

Seriously, what is this, a pub?!

Victorica skedaddled out of the room in an animated fashion. I watched her bolt away.

“There, good. Goodness, you’re a good actor, little Rain!” Shelly complimented her once Victorica was well out of sight and earshot.

“Ugh... That was humiliating...” Lady Rain grumbled.

It was clear what those two had done, but I decided not to ask Shelly about it. It at least went well, and that’s all that mattered.

“Now, let’s get moving, shall we? Everyone, help us out!” Shelly said excitedly.

“Yeah!” Sacher swung up a fist, caught up in Shelly’s enthusiasm.

Seeing this, everyone else gave a quieter, sheepish “All right...” and swung up our fists with much less gusto.

“...Why do I have to be your assistant?” Fifi asked, expressionless but apparently peevish, as Shelly checked her tools.

“Oh, come now, don’t think too hard about it. It’s a good chance to look and learn. Maybe you’ll see the merit of elven magus smith techniques?”

“Hah. Hah. Hah.” Fifi gave a very monotone, dry laughter. “Unlikely.”

It appeared relations between elves and fox people were simply incompatible. By my count, they were two girls with the same hobby, except one was more spontaneous and light-hearted while the other was more logical and uptight. Somehow, in anime, those two opposites always ended up all over

each other...

“Wait!” I exclaimed in realization. “Don’t tell me Fifi’s a tsundere!”

Fifi heard me and looked at me, confused.

“Lady Mary, your imagination is running wild again,” Tutte calmly interjected.

“Everyone, do be careful out there.” Magiluka told us, looking concerned.

“You guys be careful too. If anything happens, we’re counting on you for a cover story,” I replied.

“Now then, I’m ready. Let’s head out to the holy ground before the sun sets!” Shelly said enthusiastically, like she wasn’t even trying to hide what we were doing.

“Ms. Shelly, please, you’re being loud,” Lady Rain gently admonished her.

Is it really a good idea to let her handle this?

With that hint of anxiety, we left the village in secret. But before we did, I grabbed a certain someone by the fluffy tail—we’d need a pack mule to carry our things.

“Noooo! Going with you is just gonna get me in trouble, Mary! We’re staying here!” Snow complained as I dragged her by the tail.

“Give it up, Snow. Lily’s all excited about going with Lady Rain. Surely you won’t tell her she can’t go because her big sister doesn’t want to?”

“Ugh!” Snow complained and reluctantly stopped resisting.

“It might be a bit late to ask this, Ms. Shelly, but won’t we stand out with Lady Snow?” Lady Rain asked.

“Oh, that’ll be fine. We all worship divine beasts, so as long as she remains cautious, no one should meddle in her affairs... In other words, they’ll act like she isn’t there.”

“Hey, you could have put it more nicely!” Snow protested, chagrined. Sadly for her, only I could make out her complaints.

10. Onward, to Slay Rats and Go to the Holy Ground!

As Mary and her group left for the holy ground, the elves were preparing to fight the giant rats. Schweiz was actively giving orders, and Victorica was so enthusiastic she looked like she might charge ahead and fight the rats all on her own. Both of them occasionally flashed gross smiles, like they had suddenly thought of something—both were likely dreaming of a similar scene involving the same person.

“A-Are those two going to be all right?” Roy asked Magiluka, feeling a bit taken aback. “Schweiz is one thing, but who knows what that vampire might pull. She might get us caught up in her mess...” The pair were being so gross that he ended up turning to Magiluka for help.

“I think they’ll be fine. But in case they do go out of control, Lady Mary told me a safety phrase that will settle them down.”

“What’s that?”

“‘We’ll tell on you to Lady Rain.’”

“E-Erm. I...see?” Roy nodded, not sure if he should be convinced or not.

Before long, everyone was ready to set out, and the time came to go on the offensive against the giant rats. Schweiz stepped up onto a tall platform.

“Hear me, one and all!” he called out.

Victorica suddenly linked arms with Magiluka. “Come, come! While they’re wasting their time with stuffy formalities, let’s head out!” She was making to get out of the forest.

“H-Huh?! L-Lady Victorica, wait!” Magiluka said as Victorica carried her off.

“H-Huh? We’re leaving?” Safina hurried after them.

“Yeah, I figured this might happen. All right, time to throw hands!” Sacher, who felt disappointed about being left out of the other group, gleefully followed.

“W-Wait, Lady Victorica! We’re supposed to wait here. We can’t go to the site of the—” Magiluka stopped Victorica, who was effectively dragging her away.

“Oh? Well, that’s a problem. How else am I to show my beloved sister how mighty I am?”

“Huh?” Magiluka was at a loss.

“If I were just to tell her after the fact, it would just come across as me bragging. No, I need everyone to bear witness to my achievements!”

Magiluka knew that objecting to Victorica’s demands could just result in her flying into hysterics, and while the safety phrase would neutralize her in that case, it would also take the wind out of her sails and keep her from working later on. Since Magiluka had already seen Victorica’s capability to dispatch giant rats, she knew the vampire was likely the best fighter they had here, and she didn’t want her actions to cost them that.

“I mean, if we don’t mature enough to be able to protect ourselves no matter the situation, Lady Mary will always be one step ahead of us,” Sacher suddenly said, which completely made all the doubts leave Magiluka’s heart.

Indeed—Magiluka needed to stand strong if she was going to follow *her*... With that thought in mind, Magiluka looked over her companions. Alongside Sacher, there was Safina, who’d looked uncertain just moments ago but who now seemed very determined and was readying her katana.

“Understood, Lady Victorica. Let’s go,” Magiluka said, straightening her back and turning to look at Victorica.

Seeing this resolve, Victorica let go of Magiluka’s arm. “Aaah, the faces of girls filled with determination. How exciting! Say, you mind if I take a bite? Just a little one!”

Victorica got in Safina and Magiluka’s faces, panting huskily with her cheeks flushed.

“We’ll tell on you to Lady Rain.” Magiuka glared at her as she deployed the safety phrase.

“Oh, gosh, I was just joking! Oho ho ho.”

“Hey, you kids! Where are you going?! Are you trying to get a head start?! You are, aren’t you?!” Schweiz heard their bickering and called out to them from the podium, very much ignoring the crowd he was speaking to.

“Uh, Schweiz, what about everyone’s morale?” Roy asked.

“Mm? Oh, yes, follow me, one and all! Let’s go!” Schweiz said in the most uncaring rousing call in history, then he jumped off the podium and ran after Victorica and the group.

The village men stared at him in surprise as he left. Roy himself pondered whether he was going to have to use the safety phrase.

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“Why did the giant rats overpopulate in the first place?” Safina asked Magiluka as they followed Victorica’s lead.

“Far be it from me to say,” Magiluka answered. “I believe figuring it out is part of the task of eliminating them. We should be careful, as there’s no telling what might happen.”

“For sure!” Safina replied, focusing herself on the task.

“Are you two positive we’re going the right way?” Sacher pondered. “Victorica keeps racing on ahead, but does she even know where to go?”

“Huh?!”

Magiluka looked around and indeed, Victorica was rushing quite far ahead, and clearly in the wrong direction.

“Lady Victorica, it’s not that way!” Magiluka ran ahead to stop her.

“Huh?!” The vampire girl stopped in surprise and then laughed dryly in an attempt to gloss over her mistake. “Oh, goodness me. Oho ho ho. I was doing it on purpose.”

Magiluka had to wonder what sort of person would get lost on purpose, but she was able to leave that unsaid. She had to wonder why, between Lady Victorica and Princess Emilia, all the denizens of the Dark Isle who came over to this side were like troublesome, restless puppies...

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“It should be coming into view any second now,” Shelly said, looking ahead at what was presumably the direction of the holy ground.

“By the way, won’t there be anyone guarding it?” I asked, the concern popping up in my mind.

“At the moment, I doubt it.” Shelly shook her head. “The place has been used for worship for ages, you see, but there’s nothing of particular importance there. It’s more like...the location itself is what’s important.”

“Oh, so like a ley line,” I mused.

“L-Ley line? What’s that?” Shelly looked baffled.

“Oh, nothing...” I said awkwardly.

My time with Fifi had taught me that recklessly mentioning things in front of people who work in professions like magus smithing could end up putting ideas in their heads. Since I held my tongue and didn’t say anything else, Shelly didn’t ask further.

“I say it’s used for worship, but really, the last time we used the holy ground was, if I recall...three hundred years ago? And it’s been untouched since. That’s why we don’t have guards there—we just send someone to check things out once every century or so. Given all the havoc today, I doubt anyone will be taking the time to head this way.”

While I had to tip my hat to the elves’ perception of time, I couldn’t help but wonder if treating their holy ground with such neglect was appropriate. I didn’t say that out loud, though, given that it was making things easier for us.

“Um, is that the entrance to the holy ground?” Lady Rain asked.

I looked in the same direction as her and spotted an entrance to a cave. It honestly looked more like the entrance to some scary dungeon than a sacred holy ground.

“Huh? Are we going into that dungeon?” I couldn’t help but ask and pointed at the entrance. “I didn’t know we came here to explore caves...”

“Ha ha ha, don’t worry. Even though we call it a holy ground, it looks like some kind of dungeon crawling with monsters, doesn’t it? Well, your eyes don’t

deceive you: it is exactly what you're expecting," Shelly explained flippantly.

"You never said anything about that!" I said angrily.

"Well, I might have forgotten..." the elven woman admitted nonchalantly as I was stressed over what to do now. "By the way, I'm a craftswoman, so I'm no good in a fight."

"...Same here," Fifi said.

Is this what she meant by collateral? Oh, fiddlesticks, if I'd known about all this, I'd have had Magiluka and the rest come with us!

"W-Well, I do have some sword training..." Lady Rain offered as I remained baffled by the useless elf and fox girl.

"No, having you fight wouldn't do." I cut her off, calming down as I refused her suggestion politely.

That just leaves...

I glanced up at Snow, who noticed my gaze and looked back at me, a reluctant look on her face...

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I'll have to handle it. Fine! I'm the best fit for the job, after all! Sure, I'll beat those monsters silly!" She consented, albeit begrudgingly.

"Sorry, Snow. You're our own only hope here." I patted her fur comfortingly as she sulked.

"Hey, wait a second. Why are you acting like you're not going to fight too?! You're going to pick up some of the slack, right?!" She keenly realized the implication and started gently gnawing on my head in complaint.

"St-Stop it, Snow, it tickles!" I giggled...and Shelly was stunned by what looked like a lady getting her head chewed by a big snow leopard.

"Erm, is everything all right?" she asked and pointed at me.

"Not to worry. This is normal for Lady Mary," Tutte clarified serenely.

Shelly seemed convinced by Tutte's calmness, simply nodding in understanding as she watched me getting gnawed on.

Wait, everyone's reaction is kind of off.

Everyone was looking at me the same way they looked at Lady Rain when she toyed with Lily, but the scale and situation were clearly different.

Tutte approached me and handed me my Legendary Sword (Cringe), which she had prepared. “Lady Mary, you should get ready,” she said.

“You’re always awfully prepared.”

Yeah, fine, I’ll do it. They won’t let me off the hook until I do, will they?! Fine! I’ll beat those monsters silly!

I accepted the sword with the same begrudging resignation as a certain big cat, whom I also headed for the entrance alongside. But then...

“Stop,” I said before Snow walked in.

“What’s wrong, Mary?” Snow turned to look at me.

I said nothing, instead pointing my sword toward the ground and tapping on the floor with its tip. Facing this dungeon reminded me of Castle Bloodrain, and I had a bad feeling. But having confirmed the path was safe, I made to walk in...

“Okay, looks like there’s nothing here. All right, let’s go in— Gaaah!”

...only for the ground to disappear from under my feet two steps in.

“Whoa there!” Snow bit into my clothes’ collar at the last second, pulling me back and preventing my fall.

“Th-Thanks, Snow...” I said as she lowered me to the ground.

“Oh, right, I did set that trap back when I was a child...” Shelly said with a smile like she’d just remembered, admitting to being the culprit of this crime.

“Why did you put that trap here?” I said, somehow maintaining my cool because of her smile but preparing to lash out depending on her answer.

“Well, the elves wouldn’t give me permission to travel, so I set it up as a prank to get back at them...I think?”

“What do you mean, you ‘think’? And why did the village’s elves just leave this nasty prank here?”

“That’s simple. If they got mad at me over the trap, they’d be admitting to falling for a child’s prank. The old elves are really prideful like that, so they’ve

just left the trap here instead of acknowledging it."

I massaged my temples nervously. Listening to Shelly gave me a headache.

Just stay calm, Mary. Stay chill. Just take extenuating circumstances into account here...

"Okay, let's forget about that for now. Why didn't you say there's a trap there?"

"Oh, that part's also simple. I just forgot it was there! Oh, and looking back at it now, I set up the trap hole at the entrance to Victorica's dungeon too," Shelly said proudly.

Her memory was honestly awful, but more surprising still was that she'd set up the nasty trap in Victorica's place too.

"So, to confirm, are there any other...traps like this lying around here?"

"Hmm, no. I think?" Shelly gave another noncommittal answer.

"That's not good enough! I need a straight answer!" I blustered at her, reaching the end of my rope.

"If it bothers you that much, I'll take the lead. That should do, right?" Shelly walked past me and started leading our group.

"But what if you're forgetting something else...?" I asked with weary concern.

"Hah hah hah. Do you really think I'm stupid enough to fall for my own tr—" Shelly had turned around and was cackling at me confidently before the ground gave way under her and she fell into a hole.

You actually doubled down on your trap?

Given that it was identical to the prior trap, I had to assume it was made by her too.

"...Yes, I guess you *are* stupid enough to do that," Fifi expressionlessly walked up beside me and looked down at Shelly, who was half-submerged in the muddy water at the bottom of the pit. I could see Fifi's tail swaying a little.

"Who put this useless trap here?!" I heard her shout angrily from the bottom of the pit.

“You, if I had to guess!” I shouted back at her.

11. Slaying Giant Rats!

“Impossible...” Roy whispered in disbelief, looking at the distance from atop a hill. “How are there so many of them?”

“There’s fifty...no, almost a hundred,” Schweiz said, his eyes fixed on the same sight.

The two of them were looking at an open clearing where all the trees had been knocked down and a large number of giant rats were gathered. Like Schweiz said, there were nearly a hundred of them. The creatures were spilling out of a nearby cave and converging in the clearing. The fact there were so many of them in the cave was surprising on its own, but more shocking still was that they weren’t being devoured by the monsters in the cave.

“This is trouble, Schweiz. Those things are nocturnal. Once the sun sets, all of those giant rats are going to move out at once, and I don’t think we can handle them. At worst, if they head for our village...”

“I know! But we never planned for numbers like this. What about the other tribes? Haven’t they dispatched hunting parties to help slay the rats?” Schweiz asked hopefully.

“The other tribes’ members scouted the area, recognized the situation, and withdrew to report it. Some of the further tribes’ scouts haven’t yet arrived here.”

“Impossible!” Schweiz looked outraged. “If they only send out their forces now, it’ll be too late—”

“Calm down, Schweiz,” Roy stopped him. “If it weren’t for Lady Mary’s advice, we’d surely also have dismissed the threat as merely being a handful of giant rats.”

Schweiz seemed to regain some of his composure.

“Heh heh heh...” Victorica, who listened in on their exchange, puffed up her chest and declared. “This is but a gathering of pathetic rats. They are no threat!

You have the oldest, strongest vampire, Victorica Bloodrain, on your side!”

“What do you say, Schweiz?” Roy asked, apparently ignoring Victorica’s words. “With no reinforcements on the horizon, we can’t ignore this situation.”

“Yes... I suppose we have to do what we can,” Schweiz said grimly.

“Hey, you two!” Victorica pointed at them in complaint. “You have quite the nerve, ignoring me!”

“You say that, but it’s clear these aren’t numbers you can deal with either,” Schweiz countered. “And besides, letting you handle everything is bound to end in disaster.”

“Excuse you?! What do you mean by that?!”

Schweiz and Victorica started bickering despite the tense situation.

“Oho ho ho, I see what this is all about,” Victorica said haughtily. “You insist I lack the strength, but you’re actually just afraid I will hog all the glory to myself and monopolize my sister’s praise. You can sit by and watch, puny elf, as I make a grand display of my capabilities!”

“Wh-What are you saying?! That’s most certainly not the case! It’s just that you have no place here. Just stand back and don’t get in our way.”

Despite the situation calling for them to put their differences aside to overcome this predicament, their bickering only escalated. Roy and Magiluka approached both of them and put a hand on Schweiz’s and Victorica’s shoulders respectively. Each of the arguing duo turned to look at the person now holding their shoulder.

“Schweiz, that’s enough,” Roy told his fellow elf.

“Now is neither the time nor place for this, Lady Victorica,” Magiluka admonished the vampire.

“But Roy, this girl—” Schweiz argued and pointed at Victorica.

“D-Do not blame me, you fool. It’s rude to—” Victorica said, outraged.

“If you don’t stop, I’ll tell the princess.”

“If you don’t stop, I’ll tell on you to Lady Rain.”

Roy and Magiluka uttered the safety phrase with leaden smiles, their grips on their comrade tightening. Roy had to appreciate the fact Mary was wise enough to predict this development and even come up with a phrase that could diffuse it. He had to admit that the Ice-Blooded Witch's trust in the girl was well placed.

"Let us end this comedy routine here, shall we?" Schweiz said. "Victorica, how were you going to dispose of the rats?"

"W-Well, since everyone is in the right mood now, let us get down to business," Victorica replied, acting like the argument earlier didn't happen. "With them gathered in one place, I could kill forty or fifty of them with a single spell."

The elves gasped in amazement at Victorica's declaration. They recognized that only high-order sorcery could kill that many rats with a single spell.

"And if you do that, the rats are bound to charge at us... So, as you cast the spell, we'll use our bows to fire a fusillade and whittle their numbers further. We will take out any stragglers one by one. How do you find this plan?"

The valor-seeking duo looked very proud of their strategy, although Roy and Magiluka continued to eye them wearily.

"Very well. Everyone, set up a formation around Lady Victorica and prepare to shoot. Get a move on!" Roy started giving out orders.

"Aye!" The elves all called out in response.

"W-Wait, but I'm the leader..." Schweiz murmured, feeling like his expectations were dashed, but he followed Roy's commands all the same.

Upon everyone getting into position, Magiluka found herself once again stunned by the sheer number of giant rats. At the same time, she was struck by how strange it was that the rats had left the cave yet weren't going anywhere. She'd figured this was mere overpopulation, but the rats seemed almost coordinated—as though someone were commanding them.

Despite her anxieties, she soon dismissed the idea and turned to look at Victorica, who was standing beside her.

"Lady Victorica, are you ready?" Magiluka asked, tensing up and bracing for

action.

“Ah, give me a moment,” Victorica replied casually and started fidgeting.

Magiluka peered at her suspiciously, only to observe as the vampire girl carefully removed her eyepatch, folding it like it was something very precious and stowing it away in her pocket. Upon doing so, Victorica opened her normally closed eye, revealing its red glow and getting oddly excited.

“My seal shall now be undone!” she exclaimed loudly. “Behold my might and tremble in fear! Know my name, for I am the oldest, strongest vampire, Victorica Bloodrain!”

“Lady Victorica, please quiet down. The enemy might hear us,” Magiluka calmly chided her.

“Ngh, p-pardon.” Victorica fumbled on her words and apologized.

“Looks like the elves are ready over there. We should get things started,” Sacher cut into their exchange, looking very excited.

Victorica soared up, her fangs bared. “Mweh heh heh. Take pride, vermin, for you have the honor of slaking my thirst this night. Now, present me your blood! Pandora’s Bloodshriek!”

Victorica spoke the words of power, and a magic circle formed in front of her. She then chanted into the circle, and ultrasonic echoes emanated from it and washed over the giant rats. As the rats bore the harsh reverberations, their bodies were torn asunder, blood spurting from their orifices as they squealed in agony. The creatures’ spilled blood, rather than fall to the ground, pooled overhead into a single large droplet.

The elves were stunned. In the blink of an eye, the giant rats had been reduced to nearly half their numbers.

“Now, for the finale!”

As Victorica floated in midair, her crimson eye glinted. She reached out to the droplet, and it drifted toward her hand, only for her to slurp up the coalesced fluid in one swift movement.

“B-Brutal...” Even Sacher was taken aback by the sight.

Safina was quite pale in the face, looking like she was about to become nauseous. Indeed, someone actually did vomit from the spell...

“Bweeeeh!”

...and it was none other than Victorica herself. After she landed, she bolted toward a nearby bush and lost her lunch in a most unladylike manner.

“L-Lady Victorica, what’s the matter?!” Magiluka hurried over to her and started stroking her craned back.

She’d just dealt a terrific attack on the enemy. Why was she the one getting sick?

“Heh heh heh...” Victorica cackled feebly. “This spell is specialized vampire sorcery passed down in House Bloodrain. Given a choice, I would not bring it to bear here...”

“W-Was it that dangerous of a spell?” Magiluka stroked her back, concerned. Was it a spell that damaged its own user? If so, she felt quite guilty at pushing Victorica to use it.

“Heh heh heh. It’s a special spell that exsanguinates the blood of those with weak magic resistance and gathers it for easy consumption.”

“So, you mean...?”

“Heh heh heh... The blood of giant rats is...certainly sickenin— Bweeeh!”

Before she could finish her sentence, Victorica once again covered her mouth, feeling the contents of her stomach regurgitate. The whiplash from the impressive display she’d put on just moments ago rendered Magiluka speechless.

“I will, um, not disclose this to Lady Rain and simply say you disposed of the giant rats.”

“Thank goodness you’re an understanding girl...” Victorica said, her face pallid as she leaned her head toward Magiluka’s. “As thanks, I’ll give you a sip, if you don’t mind mouth to m— Mmf!”

“No, thank you!” Magiluka pushed Victorica’s head away with both hands.

The fact Magiluka was able to shake her off like this was proof of how weak Victorica was at the moment—although it was just indigestion...

“Sorry to interrupt, but Schweiz is asking if you could cast that spell again!” Sacher called out to them.

“You might not be watching what we’re doing, but at least pick up on the situation from our conversation, would you?!” Magiluka snapped back at him.

“Right, of course! Uh, get well!” Even Sacher, as dense as he was, was able to understand the situation and reported it to the elves. “Hey, can someone tell Schweiz Victorica is throwing up and can’t move?!” he yelled loudly.

“You fool! Don’t stop at figuring things out! Have some tact too!!” Victorica hollered at him from inside the bushes at a similar volume to his calling to the elves. Her voice echoed loudly through the forest...only to be followed by the sound of squeaking from inside the cave.

“Wh-What happened?” Magiluka, who was lending Victorica her shoulder, looked around in concern.

“Skree! Skree!” Something was squealing from within the cave.

“Goodness, it is loud out here... Hmm?” Victorica said for some reason.

As she did, something came out of the cave—and since Magiluka’s group was near the entrance, they ended up being the ones to come face to face with it. Victorica was still pale in the face, her legs were wobbly, and she felt so disgusted from the rat blood that she had to be carried by Magiluka. Sacher and Safina stood in front of them, their swords at the ready, as a figure revealed itself from the darkness of the cave.

It had thick, sharp claws protruding from its hands and feet, and its protruding front teeth glinted. It wore a crimson cloak that flapped as it walked, and it had a small crown on its head.

It carried all the undeniable majesty of a king...and the unmistakable form of a giant rat. As it stood on its hind legs next to Sacher, who had taken a stance with his sword drawn to face the creature, the giant rat appeared to be slightly shorter than the boy—quite a large stature by giant rat standards, but one too short to seem threatening to the typical human.

More than anything else, this giant rat looked much fluffier and cuter than its peers. If Mary had been present, she'd have assumed it was more of a house mouse or a hamster.

"E-Erm... Safina, what is that?" Sacher asked, disappointed after expecting something more impressive to come out.

"I-I'm sorry, I've never seen anything like this before either. I do think it's a giant rat, but..." Safina said, her hand still on her sword.

"Skree! Skree!" the giant rat screeched at them.

"'Insolent fool! Do not compare me to an ordinary giant rat'...is what it's saying." Victorica had decided to interpret its words for some reason.



Magiluka recalled that people from the Dark Isle were capable of understanding the words of sentient monsters, but that didn't mean that anyone from there could do it, nor that every monster was sentient enough to be understood.

"I know that you're far from the average demon, but I'm surprised you can understand what a giant rat is saying," she told Victorica.

"Mweh heh heh. I am talented, after all. I can understand the gist of what monsters say. I was bored, so I studied up on it!"

"W-Wow, really? Impressive, Lady Victorica..." Magiluka said, unsure of how impressed she should be.

After all, if she could even understand giant rats, her studies must have been relatively comprehensive, and the effort she'd put into them must have been considerable... However, her reasoning for doing so was less than laudable. She could honestly only envy vampires for their longevity.

"Kee kee kee kee, skree! Skree!" the giant rat screeched, waving its arms about and breathing heavily in a very dignified manner.

"...I am Lurdrat, king of all giant rats! Bow your heads!" Victorica translated.

Between her and Emilia, Magiluka had to wonder why people from the Dark Isle were so devoted to interpreting the words of monsters, but she was grateful nonetheless.

"Skreeeee!" However, "Lurdrat" raised its voice in complaint and stomped its feet, seemingly displeased with her interpretation.

"Hm, I got it wrong? 'My name is Lurdraaaat'...?"

"Skree! Skreeeee!"

"That's what I'm saying! Lurdrat!"

Sacher and Safina confusedly watched Victorica argue with the rat ruler, but Magiluka realized what the problem was.

"Excuse me, but do you mean it's 'Lordrat,' as in, the lord of the rats?" Magiluka asked, to which the rat king nodded enthusiastically.

“My, isn’t that wondrous?” Magiluka whispered in amazement. “A giant rat that understands human speech. He must have been born by coincidence as the giant rats bred in large numbers. Gathering the giant rats under his leadership must be some power he possesses... “

Only Magiluka seemed to care about the significance of this, however. Sacher and Safina didn’t understand how much of a big deal it apparently was, and Victorica was totally indifferent. For his part, Lordrat appeared pleased with Magiluka’s praise and flapped his cape toward her.

“Kee kee kee kee, skree! Skree!” The rat squeaked with glittering eyes.

“‘Indeeeeeed! This female seems to understand how important I am, I see,’” Victorica again interpreted.

“Yes! I’d love to take you alive and conduct all kinds of research on you!” Magiluka replied, making the rat shudder.

“Skreeeeeee!” The rat lunged at Magiluka in a rage, seeing her as a threat.

“‘You’re even worse than the other crazy female!’ Wait, did you just call me crazy?!” Victorica realized its insult angrily.

Once Lordrat attacked Magiluka, Sacher bashed his shield against the rat’s flank. The creature let out an adorable squeal as it went flying in a perfect curve.

“Whoa, he’s weak!” Sacher exclaimed in surprise, perhaps expecting a king to be stronger.

After rolling on the ground twice over, Lordrat hopped to his feet, wounded. It seemed that although he was quite intelligent and graced with special abilities, in terms of combat prowess, he was as weak as, if not weaker than, the average giant rat.

“Kee kee kee, skree! Skreeeeeeeeeee!”

“‘Not bad. Truly, you are a hero. You make for a worthy opponent,’” Victorica interpreted.

“No, I’m no hero.” Sacher waved his hand dismissively, apparently forgetting he was in the middle of a fight.

“Skree! Skree!”

“‘I, too, shall put forth my best effort. You may be a hero, but there is only one of you, and we have might in numbers! Those who outnumber win! Those who outnumber prevail’... Wait, he’s trying to do something! Be careful!” Victorica cut off her interpretation to warn about Lordrat’s impending actions.

Lordrat loosed a high-pitched squeal, and all the nearby giant rats lunged at Sacher at once. Sacher picked up his shield, excited to test the extent of Lordrat’s powers.

“Endow air magic—Wind Blade Slash!” Safina chanted as she swept by Sacher’s flank and drew her katana swiftly, unleashing a blade of wind at the giant rats, slashing through them so quickly they didn’t even have time to make a squeak.

“W-Wow... Good stuff, Safina! Gosh, I should really get Fifi to make me something too,” Sacher said with envy as Safina sheathed her magic-enhanced katana.

“Skree, skree!” Lordrat seemed to falter a few steps, not expecting his minions to be dispatched so easily.

“‘Grr, to think there were two heroes present! I suppose I must have been recognized as that much of a threat...’”

“No, I’m still a student at the academy,” Safina said, waving her hand dismissively like Sacher had.

It seemed Lordrat regarded every threatening human as a hero, likely out of a belief that nothing but a mighty hero could cause him trouble.

“Skree, skree Kee kee kee!” He screeched something, but Victorica didn’t interpret this time, prompting everyone to look at her curiously. Magiluka noticed that Lordrat had his eyes fixed on Victorica as well.

“Mweh heh heh...” Victorica cackled and walked away from Magiluka to approach Lordrat. “I didn’t want to move much because of my upset stomach, but now I’ve recovered, it seems. I’ve simply interpreted your words so far, but let me say this... Stop laughing like that, you foolish rat! It’s too similar to my laugh!” She looked outraged.

“Skree, skree!”

“This laughter is worthy of a king such as you, you say...?” Victorica said and nodded sagely. “Hmph. I won’t deny that it’s a laugh worthy of a sovereign.”

Magiluka could only watch on in disgust. What in the world were they squabbling over?

“But either way! The only worthy ruler here is I, the head of House Bloodrain!”

“Skree, skree!” Lordrat screeched in a tone that rang with triumphant complacency.

“‘Mweh heh heh... Laughable! I am king, while you are a mere family head. We are on a whole different level,’ you say?! You rotten sewer dweller! I will slay you like the vermin you are!” Victorica roared angrily.

Victorica flew into a most unladylike rage, her red eye glinting and her fangs bared. Lordrat seemed oblivious to the threat she posed and continued squealing victoriously before letting out one loud screech. In response, something rumbled inside the cave. Countless footsteps—no, pawsteps—approached them.

“Come on, there’s more of them? And they’re bigger than the giant rats we saw before.” Sacher keenly heard the threat ahead of everyone else and spoke up in alarm.

“Mweh heh heh... So this is the strength in numbers you boasted of before? Laughable. Numbers mean nothing in the face of true power. Watch as I reduce your so-called army into an organized mass!” Victorica said as everyone else panicked, striking a pose that she probably thought was dashing, but mostly looked strange to everyone else. If Mary had been present, no doubt she would have called her cringey.

“Come forth, my minion!” Victorica said, producing a magic circle from which a gigantic mass appeared.

The bone dragon emerged, letting out a roar that made the giant rats cower, but moreover, made all the nearby elves flee in terror.

“Th-The Dragon of Calamity!” the elves screamed.

“Everyone, fall back! Before we get caught up in its attacks!” Roy instructed everyone to forget about the rats and flee.

“Bone Dragon! Kill them!”

The Bone Dragon howled in response, swinging its tail (that had since recovered from being smashed by Mary) at the giant rats. The wind pressure produced by its swing was intense, and even those rats that weren’t hit by the tail directly were blown back into trees or the cave wall and died on impact. Magiluka, who watched on from Victorica’s side, had to admit the elves were wise to run away.

“That’s enough appetizers—let’s go for the main dish. Bone Dragon, use your rot breath!” Victorica pointed at the giant rats emerging from the cave entrance.

The dragon parted its bony jaws, and a magic circle formed in its mouth. A wise human would flee on sight of this, and the giant rats, instinctively picking up on the threat they were facing, simply froze up.

“Fire!” Victorica shouted.

At her order, the bone dragon spewed a flood of some strange, ominous looking fluid at the cave.

“Here it comes! It’s her dragon’s vomit breath!”

“It’s throwing up!”

Hearing the elves say this, Magiluka could only see the breath attack as vomit, and she had to wonder in disgust why, between this dragon and its mistress, she was seeing so much vomit today.

“Jeez, what a way to go...” Sacher said, watching as the giant rats splashed by the vomit—or rather, the breath—all started rapidly decaying.

Victorica had intentionally missed Lordrat with her dragon’s attack, and she looked over at the rat ruler, gloating as he fell backwards in shock.

“Mweh heh heh. Do you see my power now?” She smiled triumphantly, her red eye still glinting menacingly.

“Hey, Victorica! You almost got us caught up in that attack!” Schweiz hollered at her from behind. “I’ll tell on you to the princess!”

Victorica’s face turned pale, and she looked around in a panic.

“H-Hey, wait, don’t! No one got hurt, so why tell on me?!” Victorica pleaded.

“That’s thanks to Roy’s quick thinking!” Schweiz replied. “You forgot all about us in your anger, didn’t you?!”

“N-No! N-Not at...all...” Victorica averted her gaze guiltily.

“Should you two be arguing now?” Roy stepped in between them. “Perhaps you missed it, but that Lordrat thing ran into the cave, and those three went after him. Do you want them to take the credit for that?”

The two instantly looked toward the cave entrance and sprinted inside.

12. Arriving at the Holy Ground, and...

We walked through the holy ground’s cave for what felt like a long while.

“Are we there yet?” I whined to Shelly. I wasn’t physically tired or anything, but I was getting bored of walking.

“Aha ha ha, I’m sorry,” Shelly said with a smile. “We’re almost there. We elves actually discovered the holy ground by accident in this winding cave. For what it’s worth, we’re taking the shortest route there.”

“...Elves abide by their danger, so they do not dig new tunnels through caves, and they lack the means to do so even if they wanted to. And visiting the village taught me that veteran elven smiths stick to tradition and established techniques, refusing to challenge themselves to learn anything new,” Fifi said.

She sounded very disappointed, since she’d come along to be inspired by new, novel production techniques, but she’d come up rather empty.

“Oho ho, that’s harsh,” Shelly said with a nasty smirk. “I heard in my travels about your master, Girtz. He squandered his wealth and assets on exploring new techniques and caused dozens of disastrous incidents that imperiled his country. There was one just recently too. Maybe trying to find new things all

the time isn't always such a good idea."

"...Stupid old man. I'll punish him when I come home..." the fox girl whispered belligerently.

I decided to leave that matter untouched, and instead looked to Lady Rain, who was glancing around repeatedly.

"Is something the matter, Lady Rain?" I asked.

"Ah, no. It's just, Miss Shelly said there were monsters in this cave, but we haven't run into anything the whole time..."

She was right, come to think of it. Shelly did warn us about monsters, but I'd forgotten because of the traps.

"You're right. How come we haven't run into anything?" Shelly said. "But I guess it's a good thing we're safe. Oh, and we're almost there. See, it's past here."

A pair of large double doors came into view. They looked quite hard and solid.

"A door? Did your people make it?" Lady Rain asked Shelly, overwhelmed.

"Heh heh. Impressive, isn't it? Really gives you the feeling you're about to enter holy ground," Shelly said proudly, demanding praise.

"If I had to say, it looks like the entrance to a boss room in a video game," I said.

"'Video game'? 'Boss room'?" Shelly blinked.

"Ah, erm, never mind..." I said evasively.

"...Wait. Something smells strange on the other side," Fifi told us cautiously, her beastman's sense of smell catching onto something.

"All right! Let's enter the holy ground!" Shelly ignored her warning and jovially made for the door.

"...Don't just say 'All right' and write me off," Fifi said moodily.

The door opened with a creak, and we caught a glimpse of what lay behind it —the pretty, gleaming surface of a shallow underground lake with a giant creature in its center.

“King Ghido— Whoaa?!” I started running my mouth as its shape came into view, but I managed to hurriedly slap my hands over my mouth. Nevertheless, my voice did echo a little, prompting the creature to look our way.

It really was a door to a boss room!

Then the monster responded to our intrusion in a way I’d never expected.

“Nooo, you pervs!”

“E-Erm... Snow, do you know what that is?” I pointed at the giant thing swaying and twisting at the center of the lake.

“Looks like a hydra,” Snow replied. *“They’re pretty tricky creatures.”*

“Tricky,” huh? Yeah, I guess that sounds about right.

I recalled what the hydra had just said and concluded it must have a really annoying personality. I looked at it again. A hydra—a creature with three heads growing out of a single torso. It was a pretty famous monster in fiction and games from my past life, but in this world, its heads could be as few as one and as many as a hundred.

I remember hearing in class that cutting one head off makes two grow back, and how strong a hydra is depends on its number of its heads. This one has three, so... Aah, I can’t, it really looks too much like that one king monster from the movies.

“Hey, we may all be girls, but you can’t, like, leer at us when we’re naked in the bath. Ugh, this is why I hate races with low intelligence...” I heard the hydra say.

We’re all girls? I guess that’s a female hydra, then. Not that I can tell.

“Wait, you say you’re naked, but it’s not like you wear clothes!” I snapped at the hydra.

“Huuh? What are you, stupid? Why’re you taking me seriously? Pfft, talk about clueless! I can’t even.”

I felt myself get angry. I went along with her joke and she laughed at me for it!

“Hmm, Mary? Why are you talking to yourself? Did you lose your marbles?”

Shelly asked me.

I was shocked. Shelly was peering out from the other side of the door. Only me, Tutte, Snow, and Lily were in the room. I could see Lady Rain had tried to go in, but Fifi had stopped her. I looked at Tutte fearfully, and she picked up on my intention and shook her head regretfully.

This again?!

I had the vague suspicion this might be the case, because the hydra's voice was ringing in my head like Snow's did. But since I was so used to talking to Snow, I'd gotten used to it and didn't quite realize what was going on...or maybe I just didn't want to admit it.

Thanks to Fifi, I'd managed to dispel the notion that I was some nutcase hearing voices. Well, for everyone present except Shelly. I assumed Fifi would explain what was happening to her sooner or later and returned to the matter at hand.

"Um, Ms. Shelly, does the hydra being in the lake get in the way of the ritual?"

"Well, yes, but do you think we can ask it to move away and expect it to be nice and comply?" Shelly said, apparently filled in by Fifi on the fact I could seemingly communicate with the creature.

Sure enough, we all wanted to avoid trouble, but if the other side wasn't prone to listen, we'd have to come to blows. And everyone present could tell that coming to blows with a hydra wasn't a smart idea.

Thankfully, everyone evacuated behind the door, so I moved in to shut the door behind me.

"M-Mary?" Shelly looked at me, alarmed.

"I'll talk to the hydra and try to convince her. You all just wait here. Understood? Don't open the door or peek inside, no matter what," I said as I closed the door, harkening back to a certain story.

"And what'll happen if we do?" Shely asked, her curiosity tickled.

I beamed at her. "You'll all get a spanking in the tush. Collective responsibility!"

And with that said, I shut the door.

“Hey, could you not say I’m ‘in the way’ and all that stuff? I’m, like, right here. Really kills my vibe,” the hydra said as I approached it, apparently having listened in on us.

It turned its necks to look at me, and its tone of voice was quite weird.

“Oh, sorry about that.” I looked up at the hydra and spoke as pleasantly as I could. “Um, I’m Mary. So, I know this is out of nowhere, but if you could please listen... This is the elves’ holy ground. We need to conduct a ritual here. Could you please move away for a bit?”

“Ha, no,” she replied right away, laughing me off. *“You’re, like, really dumb, you know that? Like I care if the elves call this their holy ground. This is like, my spot, and I’m not giving it to anyone. You’re a clown if you think asking nicely is gonna get me to care, aha ha ha!”* The hydra threw back all three of her heads in a fit of laughter.

“Is there any way I could get you to change your mind?”

“Gawd, you’re getting on my nerves! You think you can order me around, human?! As if!” After saying this, the hydra spewed a bit of venom on me.

“Lady Mary!”

“Mary!”

I was drenched in venom, surprising Tutte and Snow, but thanks to my skill, it felt less like venom and more like ordinary spit. I was unharmed...if not for the fact a snake had just spat on me.

She spat on me! I didn’t even do anything, and she spat on me!

The shock of what’d just happened made my anger peak.

“M-Mary, are you all right?!” I heard Snow ask nervously, likely out of concern for me.

“...I’m fine, Snow. Don’t worry about me,” I said, wiping my sticky hair.

“That’s good, but how didn’t it hurt you?” Snow asked, confused.

“Huh? Wait, you’re not hurt? How? That’s, like, what the heck?,” the hydra

said, looking just as surprised. *“Omigosh, I’ll just bite you and inject it directly!”*

The hydra’s right head opened its mouth wide and lunged at me. I unflinchingly drew my sword and swung it casually.

“Huh?” The hydra gave this silly utterance as one of its heads flew through the air. *“Ooooow! What the hell, sis?! That sword doesn’t even have a proper blade, how did it just lop off my head?! It’s like, pretty hard to penetrate my skin! Aah, aaaaaah, this is so fricked!”*

The hydra panicked at how I effortlessly cut off one of its heads, but that didn’t clear my frustration at all.

“W-Well, too bad for you! A-A-Attacks like that totes don’t work on me! I-I’ll just... I’ll just regenerate it in no time!”

Indeed, the missing head soon grew back, but the high-pitched way the hydra had said it implied it took some effort to do so.

“What impressive regenerative powers. So, this is a hydra’s power...” Snow said.

“Say, Snow,” I said. “In my memories, I remember hearing about how Heracles slew the hydra.”

“Hera what now...? What’s that all about?”

Snow was confused by my seemingly incoherent question, but I ignored that.

“In that story, when he cut off anything but the hydra’s body, its heads kept growing back. So, once he cut off a head, he would burn the wound with fire to cauterize it, and once he cut off the last head, he buried it under a rock. Would that work in this case?” I asked with a thin smile.

*“That’s scary!” S*now exclaimed. *“Like, the story is scary, but your eyes are* really *scary right now!”*

“Wh-What are you thinking?! If you do that, I’d totes d... I mean, no, ordinary flames won’t get in the way of me healing—”

“Well, you see, I just happened to learn a new spell in Victorica’s castle. There was one sealed book, but I accidentally opened it, and it had this flame spell with a really long name... Something like, Purgatorial Flames of Purification. Tee

hee hee, if I use that, I'd be able to burn her like Heracles did. What do you think, Snow?"

"M-M-Mary, isn't that a...sixth-order spell?"



As I exuded a very dark aura and grinned, my eyes bereft of light, Snow and the hydra shuddered in fear.

“L-Lady Mary, please, come to your senses,” Tutte called out to me from afar, hugging Lily in her arms. This did make the darkness gripping me clear away a little. Indeed, Tutte was my one saving grace.

“...I was just joking, guys. Come on, just a little jest. Why are you trembling, Snow? Aren’t you a divine beast?” I chuckled and looked at Snow.

Hearing me, Snow, Tutte, and Lily all looked relieved.

“Depending on what the hydra does, I might actually do it though,” I added with a low voice and glanced at the hydra.

Feeling my glare, the hydra shuddered in fear and started sweating profusely. I never knew hydras could sweat.

“Fine, like, I’ll leave, okay! I’ll withdraw! Just keep that Hera whatever thing away from me!” The hydra trembled, begging me for mercy.

***

“Everyone, we worked it out... Huh?”

I opened the door, expecting to see Rain and the others, but instead the first thing I saw was Fifi. Baffled, I noticed Fifi was looking at the floor, so I followed her gaze, only to find Shelly lying face down with Lady Rain pinning her arm behind her back.

“Let go, I give up! I give in! My arm’s coming off! I won’t look, really! I won’t peek inside, I swear!” Shelly begged with tears in her eyes, slapping her palm on the floor.

I sighed, realizing what’d happened.

“...Oh, Lady Mary, you actually talked it out with the hydra? You really are the Argent Holy Woman. The truly strong win without fighting,” Fifi said, emotionlessly praising me—I think.

“Yeah, uhh, anyway, I think we should all get going on that ritual. Including a certain someone who’s pinned to the floor.” I cut Fifi off and spurred everyone to get to work.

Our resident smiths started preparing the ritual, with me positioned behind Tutte, Lily at my feet, and Snow and the hydra at my sides.

Why are we grouped up in this formation? It’s like I’m some kind of dangerous animal being held in check.

“By the way, hydra, where did you come in from?” I asked the trembling hydra next to me. “I’d think if you came in the same way we did, the elves would have noticed.”

“Y-Yes, I, erm, came in through there, ma’am,” she replied while gesturing her head in a certain direction, her tone very stiff and formal for some reason. I looked over and saw a large hole, likely produced by a rock slide or something. *“Since this is a very pleasant spot, it became one of my preferred places to rest in. Whenever someone would show up, I’d silence them, especially when they were very noisy. Yeah.”*

The hydra was basically babbling in a panic, and only half of what it was saying registered for me.

“You don’t have to talk all polite, you know. It only makes you harder to understand,” I said.

“What, for real? Lucky me!” The hydra instantly reverted to her usual tone. The whiplash was so extreme I kind of gave up on caring how she talked.

Wait, but if that cave connects here, what’s on the other side? “You didn’t wipe out anyone in that cave too, did you?”

“Yeah, I did. Like, they picked a fight with me, so I got angry. Since they were all kinda weak, so it was suuuuper easy.”

“Huh. Picked a fight with you, huh? I wonder why that’s such a common excuse...” I replied, recalling similar instances in my recent past.

That said, the hydra must have been really strong if she defeated all the monsters in the area. I hadn’t gotten the impression she was all that strong, but I of course wasn’t much of a standard.

“Oh, but one kind of monster was crazy cute, so I kept them alive. Figured they could be an emergency snack for if I got really hungry. They’re pretty tasty when you eat ’em whole, you know?” The hydra licked its lips, recalling the flavor.

What she’d said gave me pause. “Wait. Those monsters you kept alive, did they happen to be giant rats?”

“How’d ya know?” The hydra looked at me in surprise.

“So it’s all your fault!” I grabbed its head and shouted at it.

13. Because I Made a Promise...

Lordrat raced through the cave as fast as his legs would carry him. As his comrades rotted and melted away around him, he hurried to the deepest reaches of the cave, asking himself, “How did this happen? Wasn’t my plan perfect?”

He’d realized he was different from the other giant rats as he’d matured. He was more intelligent than his peers, and as he’d gotten older, he’d realized he had the power to command them. Armed with that realization, his world changed altogether.

That intelligence of his had also been a curse, however, as he came to know that he and his cohorts were only being kept alive through the whim of a greater, stronger being. Nevertheless, Lordrat did not despair. He decided that the giant rats should breed and grow in number. The great one had defeated all the other monsters, and the carrion left in her wake would allow for the giant rats to keep breeding.

And so, Lordrat went about his plan. He ensured the great one was kept pleased and facilitated the continuous increase of the giant rat population.

It was once he came to know the creatures called humans that everything began to change. He had ran into them in the forest, and perhaps due to his special abilities, he was able to somewhat understand their words. As time went on, his ability to grasp what the humans were saying improved, and eventually, he learned of the concept of kings from them.

At that moment, that special, yet nameless, giant rat adopted a title for himself: Lordrat, king and lord of all giant rats.

Henceforth, he redoubled his efforts to expand the giant rats' numbers, determined to make his own kingdom. By maintaining the great one's favor, he was able to use her to eliminate all the monsters that threatened his people. All the while, he did everything in his power to maintain the secrecy of the rats' safe cave and their rapid population growth, for he knew the humans and elves would send forces to exterminate his people once they realized what was happening.

Time went by, and the giant rats' numbers continued to swell. The time finally came to migrate, so Lordrat sent his minions to scout out different corners of the forest. His troops ran into humans or elves at times, but his enemies failed to look into the matter any deeper, as the rats had been sent out in small numbers to avoid rousing suspicion. Lordrat was cautious.

He'd been aware the humans outside the forest were preparing for something, but it would take them time to move out in earnest, and he'd been certain the elves living within the forest hadn't had any concerns about giant rats at all.

He'd had the perfect plan. Perfect. So why did it fail? Why did the elves make

a move now, at just the right time, after doing nothing for so long? Why did that monster, Victorica, show up?

Having lived his life in safety thus far, running into someone as powerful as Victorica had been a wake-up call for Lordrat's wild instincts. He knew he couldn't beat that thing—he needed to have the great one fight it instead. And so, with that thought in mind, Lordrat sprinted toward her abode.

But, just then, Lordrat heard voices behind him. Pursuers!

"There were so many giant rats back there though."

"Yes, we were only able to nip this threat in the bud thanks to Lady Mary's advice."

"Yes, Lady Mary is amazing. She figured out something was wrong just by encountering the giant rats once."

Lordrat could hear their words reverberating through the cave, and what he'd heard left him confused and panicked. Mary? Who or what is a Mary? Is that someone's name? But looking back at the battle earlier, there had been no one by that name there.

Confused and baffled though he may have been, Lordrat did not despair. After all, the great one—the hydra—was invincible. Lordrat believed that no one could match this godlike being.

And so it was that what he now saw shocked him beyond all belief. When he arrived at the lair of the godlike being he worshiped so much, he found it dejected as a human girl grabbed it by the head, shouting at it.

The girl's name, it seemed, was Mary—and the moment Lordrat lay eyes on this silvery girl, his awakened wild instincts warned him:

"You mustn't oppose her."

***

"Okay, preparations are complete." Shelly set up some kind of tool and turned to look at Reifus with a smile. "Now then, Little Rain, I'm going to need you to take your clothes off."

"Huh?" Reifus was taken aback by the contextless request.

“...Pervert.” Fifi ruthlessly glared at the elf.

“Oh, no, I didn’t mean it like that!” Shelly said, flustered, as she realized what the two of them were thinking. “It’s just that when contacting the fairies, you’re better off not wearing anything that binds you to this plain.”

“Is that right? I suppose I have no choice, then...”

With that said, Reifus started taking off the dress he was wearing without any second thoughts...and upon realizing he couldn’t take it off on his own, he asked Mary, who was looking on from a distance, to have Tutte help. The fact Mary was grabbing the hydra’s head puzzled him, but there were more pressing matters at hand.

Now nude, Reifus was guided by Shelly and dipped into the faintly glimmering surface of the underground lake. The water wasn’t very deep, and it only reached up to Reifus’s waist.

“Let’s begin, Rain. Close your eyes and focus on the circlet. Listen closely, but not with your ears—rather, listen within your head. The fairies will try to talk to you, and you shouldn’t ignore them.”

“Understood...”

Reifus didn’t quite understand Shelly’s explanation, but he assumed it was much like how Mary would hear Snow. However, the sounds of Fifi and Shelly working in the vicinity were loud, and Reifus kept listening through his ears. He found himself feeling impressed Mary managed to do this effortlessly all the time.

“Hmm, this is strange. The lake should be full of magic essence, but there isn’t enough of it now. Oh, did the hydra suck it up when it entered the water?”

Reifus heard Shelly despite trying to listen within his mind. Mary’s voice said something in the distance, but since it was from afar, Reifus was mostly able to shut it out. Then something splashed nearby, and he could see, through eyes opened to a crack, the hydra dipping its head into the water nearby.

“Good, the magical catalyst is complete. This should raise the magical output.”

The hydra looked like it was trying to reply in some way to Shelly's rather dangerous-sounding statement, but sadly, Reifus wasn't able to hear either of them.

Soon enough, a faint giggling sound echoed in a distant corner of Reifus's mind. Intuitively hearing the fairy's voice, Reifus squeezed his eyes shut and focused.

"Are you the fairy inside this circlet?"

"Aww, drat, you found me. Ah, yes, that'd be me... Is 'nice to meet you' the right thing to say in this case?"

The moment he made contact with the fairy, Reifus's consciousness was pulled into a place where nothing exists, where all thoughts vanished. Reifus tried to retain a firm grip on reality, remembering what Shelly said about being dragged in by the fairies. Knowing this wouldn't last for long, Reifus got to the point.

"Please, put me back the way I was... Make me a man again."

"Huh? But watching you is so much fun. Why not just stay this way? Everyone adores you as Rain. Some people even love you. Isn't that right, Golden Princess?"

This was to be expected, but the fairy unfortunately wasn't going to agree so easily. Nevertheless, Reifus roused himself, refusing to give up. If he gave up here, there was a chance the fairy would drag him away to a plane of existence from which he wouldn't be able to escape.

"But I'm this country's prince. I have responsibilities and duties."

"Are any of those fun?"

Reifus faltered in the face of the fairy's innocent question. Truth be told, he didn't always enjoy all of his duties and responsibilities. Sometimes they were even agonizing, and he had at times wished he could throw it all away and run. However, right now, they were inside his heart. Lying or bluffing wouldn't work here—he suspected doing so may even end up angering the fairy.

"W-Well..."

Even despite knowing the consequences of hiding his feelings, something stopped Reifus from giving a clear answer.

“Hee hee hee, it’s not fun, right? Then why not just throw it all away and have fun as your new self? Don’t you like the way you are now? Does it feel bad? It doesn’t! I know it doesn’t.” She giggled impishly.

Reifus felt like her words were reading into his very heart. Indeed, becoming a girl had made him realize things he hadn’t understood before. The strength of girls, their societal relations, their positions, the possibilities they have for the future... These were exciting discoveries he couldn’t deny that he liked. On top of that, he had experienced freedoms he’d never had as a prince, such as the thrilling adventure he was presently in the midst of. Although it may have been unbecoming of him to admit it, he had enjoyed himself more than he ever had before.

The moment he realized this, the boundary between his body and the surrounding space began to blur, and he felt like he was melting into the fairy’s voice. It wasn’t scary or distressing—instead, it felt like he was floating comfortably in water. The fairy’s power was consuming Reifus so much that he felt tempted to just surrender himself to it.

“Come on. All you need is to have fun with me. Don’t ask me to remove the circlet.”

The fairy’s voice was perfectly audible by now. This was proof he was being drawn in by it, but his fading consciousness kept him from being aware of the approaching precipice.

“Promise me you won’t. ♪”

“...Promise...”

As the fairy’s words lulled Reifus’s mind to sleep, a single scene flashed in his mind: he saw a silvery girl, alongside a boy and a girl who served him, all standing in a brilliant field of flowers. Next, he recalled the day he resolved to negotiate with the fairy, and the silvery girl’s smile on that day, and the words she spoke to him then.

“I...”

“Hm?”

“I made a promise. A promise to become the kind of king who could make his subjects smile.”

The milky fog began to rise from Reifus’s consciousness.

“And is doing that fun?”

“Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn’t. However, it’s not merely duty and responsibility which compel me to keep my promise either. It’s because I want to see everyone smile, and I have a way to make that happen. I was born a prince, after all. That’s my reason!”

At first, he could hardly speak to the fairy, but now he was able to eloquently express himself, and he conveyed his pure feelings to her: “I can’t stay with you. I’m going back to being a prince,” he said directly, undaunted by the possibility of angering her.

Silence hung over the pair for an endless moment. Yet Reifus waited. He’d told the fairy how he felt, and all that remained was for her to make her choice.

“Hee hee. Aw, I got dumped. Well, I guess it’s fine. I had my fun.”

“Then you’ll—”

“Yeah, I hate to see this end, but I should probably head back home before everyone starts wondering where I went.”

“...Thank you. It was a valuable experience for me. I learned a lot.”

“Hee hee. Glad to hear it.”

He couldn’t see the fairy, but he was sure they were smiling at each other right now.

“All righty, future king. Make sure you show me the kingdom you create someday.”

“Yeah... Wait, what do you mean?”

Noticing something strange in the fairy’s parting remark, Reifus called out to her, but the world around him began to fade away, rejecting his question.

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Opening his closed eyes, Reifus saw the pond, realizing he'd returned from the world in his consciousness. He nearly toppled over, but realizing the hydra's neck was supporting him, he propped himself against it with a hand and smiled.

"Thank you... I'm fine now," he gently told the hydra, permitting it to leave him alone.

"Big sister!"

Victorica's shouting echoed across the pond, and Reifus turned in the direction of the voice and waded through the water to walk toward it. As everyone hurried over, Reifus finally emerged from the water. It was at that point he realized how exhausted he felt and tumbled over. As he did, he felt something fall from his forehead and hit the cave's floor with a clink. Seeing it was the circlet, he smiled.

"I'm back, everyone. I really caused you all a lot of trouble, didn't I?"



He got to his feet on his own, but as everyone stopped in front of him, all the girls blushed profusely.

The squeals and screams of the girls filled the cave.

14. Howl, My Overactive Imagination!

Having confirmed the prince returned to his original gender (in more detail than I would have wanted), it took me a few minutes to get my heightened pulse under control.

“Why? How did my lovely sister become like this?” Victorica was having trouble coping with the situation.

“Aaah, the heavens are merciless... And here I thought we were fated...” Schweiz lamented.

Both were on their hands and knees, refusing to acknowledge reality. I didn’t feel too bad for them though—we’d already told them the truth a few times, and they’d simply chosen not to believe it.

“Lad— I mean, Your Highness, what will you do with the circlet?” Magiluka was the first to recover from the shock.

Reifus covered himself in a simple cloak he’d brought along. He couldn’t wear the dress he had on until now, after all. His hair was still long, though, so there was some visage of Lady Rain in him.

“Yes, well, I think I’ll take it with me. Do you mind, Ms. Shelly?” He directed a smile at the elf.

“N-Not at all! Do as you please, Your Highness!” Shelly said, kneeling on the floor and rubbing her head against the ground, begging for mercy.

Shelly was acting so subservient because she realized he was the first prince of the Aldian kingdom. While the kingdom wasn’t particularly close with the elves, if a prince were to complain about Shelly’s involvement in this incident, the higher-ups of the village would be forced to act and forbid her from traveling ever again.

“Aaah, why did my sister become like this...” Victorica wailed, but then she suddenly stood up. “Was it because of the hydra clinging to her when we hurried over?!”

“H-Hey, don’t get the wrong idea here!” the hydra protested. *“I was this close to being sacrificed for the ritual because of Mary!”*

“Yeah, yeah, pipe down, hydra,” I said.

For better or worse, it seemed the hydra communicated magically like Snow, and only those with high mana could understand her. That was honestly a problem for me, because it exposed my powers...but it seemed even Victorica wasn’t powerful enough to hear it.

This is one strange world. I can understand this powerful hydra’s magic words, but all I hear from this fluffy giant rat is squeaking.

I looked down at the giant rat in question, which I was cradling in my arms like an overgrown hamster. I relished its fluffiness. Unlike Lily and Snow, its fur was a bit harder and rougher, but it felt nice.

When they regrouped with us, Magiluka and the others said it was called Lordrat and was very dangerous, but it was oddly obedient to me and did whatever I told it to. Everyone else just accepted it without question, writing it off as “another Lady Mary thing.”

What’s that supposed to mean...?

Roy hurried over after everyone else, reporting that without Lordrat, the giant rats had become disorganized and run off in different directions in a hurry. That said, the bone dragon (which had been left on the surface) had culled their numbers to near extinction.

Also, since the forest had been damaged in the process, I decided I’d sentence Victorica to another sunbath tomorrow. She was responsible as its owner, after all.

“Agh, would you pipe down, Lordrat?!” Victorica said nervously. “Hearing you cast aside your kingly honor to curry favor with that woman is sickening! Just get snuggled in silence and consider it an honor that your life was spared!”

Victorica laughed suspiciously, which made Lordrat tremble and become silent and docile. I decided I'd ask Magiluka exactly what happened outside later.

"But more importantly, there's the hydra," Victorica carried on. "Can it explain what happened? Does it have anything to do with my sister becoming like...this?"

"I already told you, it was Ms. Shelly—"

"Gwaah! Aha ha ha, Mary, what are you saying? Let's all calm down, all right?" Shelly said in a panic as she grabbed me from behind and clasped a hand over my mouth.

You're the one who isn't calm here. I imagined she likely didn't want her brother Schweiz to hear she was the cause behind all this.

"Besides, why is that hydra so docile?" Victorica asked, glancing at the hydra.

"...That was because Mary—" Fifi started explaining.

"Gwaah! Aha ha ha, Fifi, what are you saying? Goodness!" I grabbed Fifi from behind and clasped a hand over her mouth. In the end, I related to Shelly's aversion to having someone say something she didn't want heard on a very personal level. I had to paper this over somehow, even if it meant making something up...

Oooh, howl, my overactive imagination! Come up with something that'll smooth over what happened! No matter how many lies you have to make up to do it!

I fully utilized my memories from my past life to come up with a satisfactory—if fake and hackneyed—explanation.

"...I want you all to close your eyes and listen. Listen to the tragic but beautiful tale of the Golden Princess and the hydra!"

Victorica and Schweiz gave an impressed 'Oooh', while everyone else simply looked baffled as I began spinning a yarn.

Closing

A long, long time ago, in a certain small country, there was a Golden Princess who was beloved by the fairies. That princess helped an injured hydra, sheltering her in her time of need. As time passed by, friendship blossomed between the princess and hydra.

The two lived peacefully, until one day war unfortunately broke out, and the princess's small country was driven into ruin. The king of the enemy country desired the blood of the hydra, and he was actually the one who'd gotten it injured in the first place—he had gone mad in pursuit of eternal life.

The hydra, angered over failing to protect the life of the princess and the peaceful place she'd granted her, attacked the enemy army in a blind rage and destroyed them. But her rage and hatred didn't stop there. The despair the country had inflicted on her had twisted her enough to take the lives of anyone who happened upon her path.

One soul, however, looked on at the hydra's actions in lament. It was the soul of the Golden Princess, lingering in the living realm in spirit form thanks to the fairies' protection. Seeing the hydra rampage and grow more injured in the process, she wept, begging the fairies for help.

"Stop her," she said. "I want to hug her—to tell her it's all right now."

The fairies were conflicted over how they could bring the princess and hydra together now that the princess had been reduced to but a soul. How could they get them to speak and embrace?

As time went by, the solution suddenly happened upon them. The fairies offered an elven woman unconditional assistance with a request, allowing the elf to use their power to create an item that would turn a man into a woman—however, the item would not merely turn a man into a woman, but rather, it would see him take on the visage of the Golden Princess herself. They placed the princess's soul in a circlet as a way to grant her wish...

However, things did not go as planned. In a twist of fate, the circlet never saw

use and was stored away, intended to remain forever undiscovered. Time went by, and the fairies were about to resign themselves to the fact that they had failed, when suddenly, a prince found that circlet.

He touched upon the princess's soul, and initially baffled by the strange experience, he'd tried to remove the circlet. However, the prince and the princess soon grew to understand each other, and the prince began acting to grant the princess's wish.

After many obstacles and challenges, the pair finally entered the elves' holy ground, where they found the hydra, stricken by guilt and loss. There, the princess was able to embrace her old friend and say, "Thank you. It's all right now."

Hearing those words, the heartbroken hydra cried out, as though it were weeping...

With the princess's wish now granted, she passed on, and the prince returned to his original form.

This was the miraculous story of how God had heard the tragic voices of the hydra and the princess, using a divine beast to guide the Argent Holy Woman to the circlet.

"...and they lived happily ever after."

As Tutte closed the book, dreamy wonderment written all over her face, I could only blink in amazement, my mind blank.

We were in my room. Our adventure had ended a few days ago, and we'd all safely returned home.

"I did give a pretty rough outline of what happened, but this is a...very much embellished, dramatized version of what I said."

That story was based on the lie I made up by utilizing all of my overactive imagination. The prince silently went along with the part about the princess's soul since it would give him a way of excusing the perfect ladylike mannerisms he'd exhibited. Shelly also went along with it because the part about the fairies using her to suit their ends exonerated her from making the circlet.

As for Lordrat, his minions had been reduced to near-extinction, and I warned the hydra about needlessly eating all the monsters in the cave and unbalancing the food chain. Roy was wary about the hydra doing anything dangerous in the future, but I simply told him to tell her that if she didn't behave, she'd be "subjected to the Heracles treatment."

The result of the giant rat incident was that Schweiz believed the fake story I made up, and believing that the hydra went mad with grief and the escapades of the fairies and the Golden Princess, told the story to his entire village. The whole thing left me in a panic, but since the elves had no contact with our kingdom, I figured the story I'd told wouldn't possibly spread too far. I'd had no way of knowing it'd end up traveling far and wide in this form...

"Wh-Who wrote this thing?!" I asked angrily.

"That would be Lady Victorica. Ms. Shelly said that Lady Victorica's imagination was greatly stimulated by your story, inspiring her to work day and night on writing this masterpiece. What's more, Shelly has been telling nobles she meets in her travels the story Victorica wrote. Forgetful as she is, she's still managing to tell them *exactly* how the story goes."

Is it just me, or did Tutte casually say something really mean about Shelly?

"Thanks to Shelly's word of mouth, both the elves and the nobles have heard this story, and it's become very popular among the young noble ladies, who apparently made quite a clamor seeking copies for their shelves. This book is one such copy, by the way. I got it from Shelly. Would you like to read it too?"

Tutte handed me the book, and I stared at it blankly. As I did, my eyes started trembling.

"Th-Th-That last bit at the end, it pins all the credit on the Argent Holy Woman! But I never said a word about that! Why didn't Victorica take all the credit for what happened?!"

"Well, that's because Victorica didn't want to be a leading actor in this story—all she wanted was to help the Golden Princess. There's a scene in the book where the princess's soul reincarnates, and they promise to meet again since she's an everlasting vampire. That scene is very popular among the ladies, by the way."

“Aaah, yes, she *is* the kind of girl to do that! Blast it all!”

“Besides, even though you were dressed in a villager’s clothes, you walked around with a large divine beast, stopped Lady Victorica, predicted the giant rat incident, and talked to a hydra. The story wouldn’t have worked if you weren’t the Argent Holy Woman.”

“Are you saying dressing like a villager made me look more like a holy woman?! What kind of logic is that?! Aaaah!”

Despite the book itself not being at fault for this, I threw it away and rampaged on my bed a bit.

“L-Lady Mary, calm down! It’s just a story! And yes, anyone involved in this incident would know it’s based on it, and they might mistakenly think that the story details the truth of what happened there, but—”

“That’s bad! I thought I’d managed not to stand out for once! Why does this keep happening?!”

With apologies to Tutte’s attempt to encourage me out of my deranged state, my heart was too fragile for her encouragement, and she only ended up making me kick and punch against the bed even harder...

Side Story: The Two's Tea Party

Hot, soothing afternoon sunlight shone on the palace's garden. The place was silent—unnaturally so, with nary a bird chirping—as two women sat opposite each other, elegantly enjoying their tea. Even the butlers and maids, waiting far enough to be out of earshot of the two's exchange, were more tense than usual.

"A tale of a miracle brought on by the Argent Holy Woman, eh...?" One woman looked at the book before her with a smile on her lips. Her name was Elizabeth, and she was known as the Ice-Blooded Witch.

"It was one of your subordinates that wrote this book, wasn't it? Peering at it like you're fascinated is quite shameless of you." This other woman was Ilysha, the Aldian Queen, also known as the God Spear Dancer.

Presently, these two lofty women were having a tea party. It only stood to reason that everyone around them had gone silent.

"Heh heh, I never knew Victorica had such talent for writing," Elizabeth chuckled, amused by Ilysha's response, and placed the book on the table. "Maybe I should have her write about the incident in the port town and describe it as one of the Argent Holy Woman's miracles. I'm sure my country's people will appreciate it."

"Heh heh, and you're hoping that by making our dear Holy Woman more famous in Relirex, she may eventually work under you..." Ilysha giggled similarly, placing her cup on its saucer and looked over to Elizabeth.

"Tell me, Lady Ilysha—" Elizabeth started saying.

"I'm not giving her up to you." Ilysha cut her off at once.

Elizabeth pouted in a way she wouldn't with anyone else.

"Mary is bound to be a person of great importance for my country, and I'm not going to give her up to you. To begin with, this entire incident happened because you provoked Victorica."

“Well, I wanted to see my dear subordinate finally come into her own.” Lady Elizabeth met Ilysha’s words not with apology, but with a headstrong gaze. “For how talented she is, that girl doesn’t have a rival to compete with, and it’s what’s making her, well, like that... So I thought that having Mary face her would trigger some change in her.”

“Well, Victorica’s maturity aside, thanks to Mary, our royal house now has connections with House Bloodrain, whom we’d not yet managed to ally with.” Ilysha beamed at Elizabeth. “Now we’re able to enter friendly relations with both Bloodrain and Relirex, which we haven’t been able to do openly in years. On that point alone, I thank you for having Mary meet Victorica.”

“Heh heh, do I detect a trace of bitterness? Well, I will admit, even I was surprised by how far things had developed when I received the report. In the end, that girl must have read our intentions and used them to her own ends.”

“I’m not handing her over to you.”

The two women grinned at each other in the silent garden. On the surface, it looked like a beautiful sight, but anyone standing between them would likely pass out within seconds from the pressure.

“Oh, goodness, poor Mary. Having to be worked to the bone by such a black-hearted queen...” Elizabeth casually changed the topic.

“Oho ho, whatever do you mean?” The queen laughed her off.

“Why did you force the prince to behave like a girl when he was turned into a woman? Surely you didn’t really just do it for fun, did you?”

“Well, I will admit it was fun, but I thought it was a chance given to me by Mary.”

Ilysha went from her pleasant smile moments ago to a serious gaze, one that seemed to direct all the emotions brewing inside her at Elizabeth.

“A chance?” Perhaps sensing Ilysha’s severity, Elizabeth inquired further while abstaining from her usual teasing.

“Yes. Reifus is a smart boy, and I know how hard he works to become a good king, so I thought this would be a good chance to have him learn and

experience the social position of women firsthand—I wanted him to see the future available to women. Many women have pedigree and important positions, and many of the women around Reifus are quite capable, yet because of antiquated beliefs, our country's women are used as mere political tools by their families. It's a loss for our nation."

"Especially that girl," Elizabeth interjected, to which Ilysha nodded.

"I believe—no, I'm certain—this incident has allowed Reifus to peer into the possibilities women possess, something he'd never known before. I suspect Mary had noticed just how much I've been trying to change everyone's way of thinking toward women. Little did I imagine she'd do something as direct as turning the prince into a woman, however..."

Ilysha paused to sip on her tea. Elizabeth patiently waited for her to finish.

"Looking back on it now, I have to wonder what she had in mind when she had the divine beast looking for something. From what Magiluka told me, after that incident, Mary had managed to detect a great many more obvious issues. What had possessed her to head straight toward such an obscure location?"

In stark contrast to Ilysha's wildest guesses, the truth of the matter was that Mary had simply taunted Snow, who had ended up looking for the most difficult to find place she could in return. Neither of them had had anything else in mind.

"Then, why did Mary, cautious as she is, go into that room alone with Reifus? She was also the first to find the circlet... The more I think about it, the more it seems she guided us to this conclusion. That outcome could mean only good things for me...and this country."

Ilysha looked into her cup, seeing her own defeated smile reflecting back at her. She rotated her cup so as to dispel the image and returned it to the saucer.

"There's no telling what her intentions are," Elizabeth offered in agreement. "The way she acts comes across as too natural."

Of course, Mary was only acting so naturally because she genuinely didn't have any such plans or truths to hide.

"So, that was your plan, then," Elizabeth said, and then, after a sip of tea, she

decided to once again change the topic. “Oh, did you keep an eye on Shelly because you wanted to see the issue in the Ancient Forest resolved?”

“Yes. Since Mary had formed a connection with House Bloodrain, I thought their meeting might help progress House Karshana’s handling of the situation, so I kept an eye on Shelly.”

“And not only did Mary create a connection with the elves, she even prevented an imminent disaster in the Karshana domain.”

The report Elizabeth had received had included the situation with the giant rats and the hydra.

“Indeed. Thanks to this case, House Karshana’s daughter, Safina, has become acquainted with the next elf chief, and she was permitted to visit the forest. Furthermore, owing to Mary’s story about the Golden Princess, our relations with the elves have improved. Whenever a new threat appears in the forest, we’ll now be able to turn to the elves for help. Mary is helping solve, or otherwise improving our position on, all the issues we’ve been unable to address or been forced to postpone handling. She’s done more than I could have ever possibly expected of her.”

“Perhaps she’s going to exceed our expectations, and this is all her own plan.”

The two smiled at each other, each looking slightly troubled.

“She’s as reliable as she is frightening,” Ilysha admitted.

“In that case, why don’t you—”

“I’m not handing her over to you.”

“Why do you have to be stingy, Ilysha?” Elizabeth said, sulking.

So went this tea party Mary wasn’t aware of, wherein two great women discussed her and her intentions.

Afterword

Everyone, it's been too long! This is Chatsufusa speaking. Volume 4 of *The Invincible Little Lady* is now ready for your reading pleasure. We've gotten this far thanks to you buying and supporting the series. Thank you kindly!

Now, while I'm already known as a slow writer, this volume I really was cutting it close. I wish *I* could have an invincible body too. Being healthy is great! Praise health! I had to go through my first brain MRI scan, and it was really scary.

But enough about me, let's focus on volume 4. I wrote this volume while trying to make sure a certain character gets to take center stage, and that character is the prince. The reason I decided to stick with this plotline can be traced back to when I was reading *The Invincible Little Lady*'s manga.

"Is it just me, or has the prince not been doing anything recently?" I pondered.

With that in mind, I decided to give him a chance to shine. I let my pen run, and without any doubts in mind, I wrote this volume's opening scene. Then, once I was done writing it, I shouted at myself, "Why did you come up with this?!" Aha ha ha.

Really, if I'd just wanted to make the prince take center stage, why was it necessary to make him into a princess? Even I'm not sure how I came up with that idea. But by the time I was done writing, I couldn't tell if Mary was the protagonist of this story or Reifus, so mission accomplished, I suppose! I hope you enjoyed it, even if it's questionable whether the prince got to take center stage this time...

Anyway, I'd like to thank Micro Magazine for their help with publication of this book; my editor, Mr. I, who helped me improve the book and make it more amusing without ever laughing off any of the choices I'd made; and the illustrator, fuumi, for making the prince into the perfect princess.

I'll be dreaming of the next time we meet! So, until then, I will be off.